



Biggles

**AND THE PLANE
THAT DISAPPEARED**

CAPTAIN W. E. JOHNS

CONTENTS

CHAPTER I: AN AEROPLANE FAILS TO RETURN

CHAPTER II: GINGER FINDS A SCENT

CHAPTER III: THE TRAIL OF THE CUB

CHAPTER IV: NOT IN THE PROGRAMME

CHAPTER V: A PROPOSITION

CHAPTER VI: STRANGE DEVELOPMENTS

CHAPTER VII: NIGHT FLIGHT

CHAPTER VIII: BIGGLES UNDERSTANDS

CHAPTER IX: TRAGIC NEWS

CHAPTER X: WHAT HAPPENED TO BERTIE

CHAPTER XI: CHANDLER SHOWS HIS HAND

CHAPTER XII: SHOWDOWN IN THE FARM

CHAPTER XIII: HOW IT ALL ENDED

CHAPTER I

AN AEROPLANE FAILS TO RETURN

SATISFIED with the performance of the Air Police Auster aircraft which he had just tested after overhaul, Biggles made a tarmac landing and brought the aeroplane to a halt in front of its hangar. Switching off he got down to be greeted by his chief mechanic with the question: "Everything all right, sir?"

"Fine. She goes like a bird," answered Biggles, pulling off his gloves as he walked on to the Operations Office, where he found Air Constable "Ginger" Hebblethwaite in the act of hanging up the telephone receiver.

"Who was that?" inquired Biggles casually.

"The Secretary of the Kingsmead Flying Club, in Bedfordshire. A chap by the name of Lorrimore—Marcus Lorrimore. He said he knew you."

Biggles nodded assent. "Yes, I know Lorry although it's some time since we met. He flew a Spit in the war. Flight Lieutenant. So he's still in the business. What did he want?"

"Your advice."

"About what?"

"He's lost an aircraft and hasn't a clue where to look for it."

"How did that happen?"

"Apparently it just took off and never came back."

"What has he done about it?"

"Notified the Ministry."

"I suppose he's made a search?"

"Yes, but he admits he didn't know where to start."

Biggles reached for a cigarette and lit it. "What's the machine?"

"A Piper Cub."

"When did it disappear?"

"Last Friday."

Biggles frowned. "Three days ago!"

"He's been expecting any moment to hear that someone has found the crash."

"Does he know it crashed?"

"Not for certain."

"Then what's he talking about?"

"He's absolutely certain that if it hadn't crashed the pilot would have been in touch, by phone if not in person, long before this."

"Was the pilot flying solo?"

"No. He had a passenger. Would you like me to get Lorrimore on the phone so that you can have a word with him yourself?"

"No. It would be easier to waffle along to Bedfordshire and get the complete gen. I'll take the machine outside. Do you want to come?"

"It's pretty dull sitting here alone waiting for possible phone calls."

"Fair enough. Let's press on."

Less than an hour later the Auster was standing outside the administrative offices of the Kingsmead Aviation Company, the official title of a private concern engaged in various air activities: flying club, instruction, charter and other work. Two mechanics were washing down an Auster, otherwise the aerodrome was quiet. Biggles and Ginger went in and found the secretary at his desk. After the greetings between old friends were over Biggles asked:

"Now, what's all this about a lost aircraft?"

"Three days ago it took off for a trip of half an hour and hasn't come back. I've phoned all the clubs in the country but no one has seen it."

"Who was flying?"

"Taffy Welsh, my chief pilot. He started in the war and has been in the game ever since, which makes him of an age when a man doesn't play tricks or take chances."

"What about the machine?"

"It's a Piper Cub we bought last year, primarily for crop dusting. We do a fair amount of that sort of work for local farmers, and some spraying for the Forestry Commission. When it's not doing that we sometimes use it for joy-riding, generally at weekends when we're less busy. There's a notice board on the road advertising joy-rides at ten bob a time, longer in proportion. It's small stuff but it all helps to keeps things going. It was one of these casual joy-riders who was in the back seat with Taffy."

"Did you know him?"

"Never seen him before. That didn't matter. He said he'd never been up and booked a trip for half an hour. He filled in the usual form with his name and address, next of kin in case of accident and relieving us of responsibility should anything go wrong. It now turns out that the particulars he gave us were false."

"How do you know?"

"There's no such address as the one he gave us. When I realized that something had happened I tried to contact it, but getting no reply I got in touch with the police. Nothing is known of a man named Lancelot Litton, the name he gave us."

"That sounds bad. Did he arrive here by car?"

"If he did I didn't see it. He just walked into the office. He didn't leave a car on the road. We looked for one. If he didn't walk all the way from the village someone must have dropped him."

"I've seen nothing in the papers about this."

"With air liners crashing all over the world a missing two-seater is hardly a front-page story."

Biggles drew thoughtfully on his cigarette. "At what hour did Taffy take off?"

"Ten past six in the evening. It was broad daylight."

“A time when there are plenty of people about. Strange nobody saw anything unusual.”

“Nobody looks up at a plane any more.”

“Not if it’s flying level. They’d look at a plane falling out of the sky. Was Taffy married?”

“No. He has a room at the village pub.”

“Well, let’s have the details,” said Biggles, taking out his notebook. “What colour was the machine?”

“Pale-blue with cream wings.”

“Registration number?”

“G-ALZX.”

Biggles made a note. “What’s your own view of this?” he inquired.

“I haven’t one. What do you think could have happened to the machine?”

“Never mind the machine. What’s happened to Taffy? This begins to look fishy. If he’s all right he should have turned up somewhere by now. The fact that he hasn’t can only mean he can’t.”

“But had the machine crashed surely someone would have found it by now.”

“Not necessarily. That would depend on where the crash occurred. There are still some lonely spots in the U.K.. I remember about 1938 a German Halberstadt was found in a valley in the Welsh hills. It must have been lying there, with a dead crew, since the First World War. In the last war an Anson with seven Poles on board diverted from the south on account of fog, disappeared in the Highlands of Scotland. That was in March. It wasn’t until September that a deerstalker in the Cairngorms came on it by accident. That’ll give you an idea of what can happen.”

“But Taffy wouldn’t go near Wales or Scotland!”

“How much petrol had he in the tanks?”

“They had been topped up. That’s our usual practice unless machines are busy with joy-rides—mostly on Sundays.”

“So had Taffy’s passenger decided to extend his flight the machine could have gone a long way from here.”

“I suppose so. But it couldn’t stay airborne for three days.”

“Obviously; but it might have gone down in the sea.”

“It might, although that doesn’t make sense. The weather was fair. Taffy is an old hand. I can’t imagine any circumstances that would have taken him near the sea. In fact, had he done so he would have told me.”

“So he had radio.”

“Of course.”

“And you heard nothing from him?”

“Not a peep.”

“Had he got into trouble or decided to extend his flight he would have told you?”

“Of course he would.”

“Assuming he was able to.”

Lorrimore’s eyes opened wide. “What are you driving at?”

“Whatever happened, and something must have happened, it must have been mighty sudden, or, as you say, Taffy would have told you what was going on. I’m wondering about this passenger. What type was this chap Litton?”

“Pretty ordinary, if I can put it like that. Nothing outstanding about him. I’d say he was about five foot nine, slim, dark, clean shaven. Wore a navy-blue suit with a greenish pork-pie hat. I remember there was a little blue feather stuck in the band. Sort of fellow you might meet anywhere. Probably did an office job. Well-spoken—oh yes, with a very slight north-country accent. I couldn’t tell you what county.”

“Anything else? It could be important.”

“He sported a natty bow tie, blue with white spots.”

“You’d know him again if you saw him?”

“Definitely.”

“Did he have any luggage of any sort?”

“Nothing.”

“What did he say when he came in?”

“He said he had seen the notice at the gate about joyrides and as he had never been up it struck him on the spur of the moment that this was an opportunity to see what flying was like. He paid the fee for half an hour in advance, and, frankly, it didn’t occur to me to question him. We’re doing this sort of thing all the time. Taffy was on duty so he took him. That’s about as much as I can tell you.”

“How was Taffy dressed?”

“In his ordinary clothes.”

“He didn’t put on flying-kit?”

“Not for a short jaunt like that. I don’t suppose he’d go above two thousand. Well, there it is. I don’t see what else I can do. I’ve had two machines in the air looking for anything like a crash. They’re still searching, although of course they wouldn’t see the machine had it gone down in a wood.”

“I take it the Cub was insured?”

“Naturally, but I imagine the insurance people will be sticky about paying up unless I can prove the machine is a write-off. Sooner or later no doubt the crash will be found by somebody, but on your own telling that could be weeks or months. In the meantime, without enough ready cash to buy a replacement we shall be a machine short.”

Biggles shrugged. “I’m sorry, laddie, but that’s your worry. I’m thinking about Taffy. He’ll have to be found.”

“Go ahead and find him,” returned Lorrimore, with a touch of sarcasm. “I’ve done all I can. If you’re going to include the whole of Scotland and Wales in the search you’ve a long job in front of you.”

“And if we’re to include Denmark, Holland, Belgium and France, it’ll be even longer,” Biggles pointed out.

“But Taffy couldn’t go abroad! He had no papers for overseas.”

“If, as you say, his tanks were full, he’d have an endurance range of at least five hundred miles.”

“But why should Taffy go abroad?” demanded Lorrimore, raising his voice. “It doesn’t make sense.”

“He may have had no choice in the matter.”

Lorrimore stared. “What do you mean?”

“If he had a pistol pointing at the back of his head he’d have to go where he was told,” returned Biggles evenly.

“Good God! You don’t think...”

“In a queer affair like this one has to take every possibility into account, however far-fetched it may seem. I don’t think the machine has gone abroad, because had an aircraft showing British Registration been seen on the Continent I should have heard of it by now through my Interpol contacts. Bearing in mind that even the best pilots sometimes run into trouble this may turn out to be nothing more than a simple accident. On the other hand, there may be more to it than that. We haven’t much to go on. However, when I’ve thought things over I may get an idea.”

“If you do you might let me know.”

“I will.”

“Are you going to start a search for the machine?”

“After what you’ve done there doesn’t seem much point in it. I feel more inclined to check up on Taffy’s passenger.”

“How will you do that?”

“We have a fair description of the man. One never knows. Now we’ll get back to base. If you get any news you might phone me right away.”

“Of course; I’ll do that. You won’t stay to lunch?”

“No, thanks all the same. We’ll get along.”

The visitors went out to the Auster and were soon back at Operational Headquarters, where they found Bertie who had been on duty at Scotland Yard.

He greeted them without enthusiasm. “Every time I turn my back you lads go gadding off somewhere,” he complained. “Been having fun without me, I suppose.”

“Far from it,” replied Biggles, taking his seat. “We have a job on our hands. You’d better know about it.” He went on to narrate briefly the story of the missing aircraft.

“But tell me this, old boy,” requested Bertie when he had finished. “Where are you going to start looking for this little flying machine?”

“I’m not going to look for it,” answered Biggles. “Lorry has already done that. To tear up and down the four points of the compass, haphazard, would be a waste of time. On the way back from Kingsmead I did some deep thinking.

I've decided to start work at the other end."

"What other end?"

"We've a better chance of finding the man Taffy Welsh took up in his rear seat."

"As, according to Lorrimore, he looks like a million other men, that strikes me as a pretty poor prospect," put in Ginger, a trifle cynically. "Where do you start looking?"

"You and Bertie are going to do the looking," returned Biggles smoothly. "And you're going to start right away. I shall prepare a concise but detailed description of the man. You will then tour all the flying clubs within easy reach asking all and sundry if anything is known, or if anyone has met, a pilot answering to the description of the man we're looking for. I shall do the far-away clubs on the telephone."

"Pilot!" exclaimed Ginger. "Who said anything about the man being a pilot?"

"I did."

"But Litton said he'd never been up in his life!"

"That's what he said. Naturally, he would, if his intention was to get away with the aircraft."

"But—"

"Listen," broke in Biggles. "Litton was a fraud and a liar. The fact that he gave false particulars of himself is sufficient proof of that. Would he do that if he was only going for a joy-ride? What would be the point of it? No. He had other ideas. He wasn't coming back. If he wasn't able to fly he could have done nothing once the machine was airborne. But if he could fly, from the back seat of an instructional plane fitted with dual controls it would be easy for him to take charge. With a pistol in his hand he could have ordered Taffy to fly anywhere. In fact, he could have shot Taffy, or knocked him on the head, and then flown to anywhere he wanted to go. Remember, Taffy wasn't wearing flying-kit, and as that includes a helmet, he had no protection. I asked the question."

"You don't think Taffy's dead," said Ginger, aghast.

"I wouldn't care to bet he's still alive. After thinking things over I'm convinced this man Litton is a pilot. Had he not been able to handle the controls Taffy would have come home. Ruling out structural failure resulting in a crash, in which even the machine would almost certainly have been found by now, it's the only explanation. If Litton is a pilot it would answer all our questions. He wanted a plane. For what reason we don't know; but with any luck we shall find out."

"It takes nerve to pinch a plane."

"What could be easier, the way he did it? Any of us could do the same thing any day. Now, if Litton is in fact a pilot somebody must have taught him to fly. That means someone in our line of business must know him by sight, if not by the name he gave Lorry. That should narrow our search. Anyway, it

should be easier to track him than locate the missing Cub, which by now might be anywhere.”

“Possibly abroad somewhere,” conjectured Ginger.

“In that case we shall hear about it in due course. You can’t aviate about the Continent without producing some authority. Litton, as a pilot, assuming he is one, would know that as well as we do; and for that reason I believe he’s still in this country. I can think of another reason. Had it been Litton’s intention to go abroad surely he would have chosen an airfield near the coast, instead of one as far away as it’s possible to get in this country. It wouldn’t surprise me if that Cub isn’t a great many miles from where it took off.”

“It isn’t easy to hide an aircraft,” said Bertie, doubtfully.

“With the wings taken off it wouldn’t take up much room. Litton, as a pilot, should know enough about rigging to be able to do that if he found it necessary. Anyhow, now you see why I want both of you to get to work and dig out someone who has met Litton, by that name or another. It may take time, but you should pick up the scent somewhere. I shall make some inquiries from here. When we know more about Mr. Lancelot Litton it shouldn’t take us long to work out why he pinched the Cub, as I’m pretty certain he did.” Biggles lit another cigarette.

“Jolly good,” murmured Bertie. “I have a feeling you’re right on the beam. Come on, Ginger me lad, let’s start sleuthing.”

CHAPTER II

GINGER FINDS A SCENT

FOR three days inquiries were pursued at urgent speed, but without result. Most flying clubs had been visited, or contacted by telephone, all to yield negative answers. The files and records at Scotland Yard, which Biggles examined, failed to produce a clue that might have given a line on the man who had called himself Lancelot Litton. He was not a member of the R.A.F. Club, or the Royal Aero Club. Taffy Welsh had not turned up nor had a crashed Cub been reported. No word had come from the Continent of an unauthorized British aircraft.

For which reason confidence at the Air Police Operations Office was fading. Fortunately no other problem had arisen to hinder investigations into the case now known officially as the Missing Cub. The Press had reported briefly and then apparently lost interest in the face of news of national importance. Air Police Sergeant Algy Lacey had gone to India to work on a report of gold smuggling.

Biggles sat in the office with Bertie discussing other possible lines of procedure. Open on the desk in front of them was a map of the Home Counties. With the Kingsmead Aviation Company's Airfield as the centre a circle with a radius of 500 miles had been drawn with a compass.

"Somewhere inside that circle is the machine we're looking for, intact or in pieces," declared Biggles. "There's no argument about that, and that being so it must be possible to find it. After all, it isn't as though we were looking for a lost wrist-watch. An aircraft is a sizeable article. If it's a wreck why has no one reported it? If it got down without being damaged why hasn't Taffy got in touch? It beats me."

Bertie answered. "I'd make a small wager it's under water somewhere, a lake or maybe a reservoir. If that isn't the answer it must be stuck on top of some bally mountain. You remember we once had a case like that. A murderer trying to get away with it plunked a Moth in a Highland loch. Unfortunately for him the tail unit showed at low water."¹

"You could be right," agreed Biggles despondently. "Well, we'll give it another couple of days; if we've heard nothing by then I shall have to ask the chief for instructions. He may decide we've put in enough time on it as it is. As I've said before, it's Taffy more than the machine—" he broke off, looking up, as Ginger, still in his flying-kit, burst in, an expression of triumph on his face.

"I'm pretty sure I've struck the scent at last," announced Ginger, taking off his helmet and goggles with unusual alacrity.

"Spill it," requested Biggles, coming to life. "Where did you find it?"

"At the Marsdale Flying School, near Oxford. I was in the clubhouse going

through the usual routine of describing Taffy's passenger when a fellow who was having a drink at the bar—he turned out to be one of the instructors, named Gordon—looked round with a sort of sneer and said: 'That sounds like Snifty Chandler.' I joined him and over another drink went into the finer details—north-country accent, blue feather in pork-pie hat—the lot. At the finish he nodded and said: 'That sounds mighty like Chandler to me.' Naturally, I said, 'What do you know about him?' He knew plenty. Now fasten your safety belts." Ginger piled his flying-kit on a chair and continued.

"If Taffy Welsh's passenger was Chandler this business will begin to look a bit grim."

"Was this fellow Chandler a pilot?" put in Biggles.

"Too true he was, and one with a pretty poor record."

Biggles nodded. "So it looks as if I was right. But why use the past tense? Once a pilot always a pilot. Go ahead. Where did Gordon meet Chandler?"

"First, in the R.A.F.. Later, at the Marsdale School, before he, that is, Chandler, was chucked out."

"What was Chandler doing there?"

"He was a flying instructor."

"Ah," breathed Biggles. "Now we seem to be getting somewhere. Carry on."

"Gordon told me he first met Chandler in the Service. Gordon was a Flying Officer and Chandler a Sergeant Pilot in the same squadron. That was four years ago. It seems Chandler was a good enough pilot till he took to booze. Next thing was he was reprimanded for reporting for duty in an unfit state to fly. In other words he was tight. It happened again, with the result that he was grounded and lost his stripes. That seems to have sent him crazy, for what must he do but take up a machine without permission and throw it all over the sky. At the court martial his defence was that he did it to prove he could fly as well drunk as sober. The case got a short paragraph in the newspapers. Of course he didn't get away with that, and out of the Service he went, on his ear, as an undesirable type."

"What a fool the fellow must be."

Ginger went on: "Later on it appears he got a job as a civilian instructor at a flying school somewhere up north. He didn't keep it long. What happened Gordon didn't know, but when he, that is, Gordon, was taken on as an instructor at Marsdale who should he find there but Chandler, still teaching people to fly."

"Did Gordon tell the management what he knew about Chandler?"

"No."

Biggles frowned. "Why not? He should have done."

"He realized that later; but apparently Gordon is one of those decent chaps who believe in giving wasters another chance. Anyway, Chandler having assured him he was now on the water wagon he let it pass. But when, later, he saw Chandler, as drunk as a lord, trying to climb into an aircraft, he went to

the club secretary and spilt the beans. That did it. Chandler was sacked on the spot."

"How long ago was this?"

"About two months."

"Did Gordon know what happened to him after that?"

"No. He just faded away."

Biggles bit his lip. "Pity. How are we going to check that Chandler was the man who got into the back seat of Taffy's Cub?"

"I've got the answer to that one," asserted Ginger, feeling in his pocket.

"Here's a photo of the Marsdale lot, pilots and pupils. It was taken outside the clubhouse for a Christmas card about six months ago." He put the picture on the desk. "Chandler is the one on the left. Lorrimore said he would know the man anywhere, so all we have to do is show him this photo. How's that for a day's work?"

"Jolly good," complimented Biggles.

"This seems to be the answer," murmured Bertie, smiling.

"Not quite," corrected Biggles. "Assuming this man is the fellow we've been looking for we are now faced with the even more difficult job of finding him. We've taken a step forward, but the original problem remains. Where is the Cub, and far more important, where's Taffy? We'll come to that when we've seen Lorry. We'll run down right away, show him the photo and ask him if he recognizes anyone."

"I left the Auster outside," said Ginger.

"Fine. Let's go."

In a few minutes, having confirmed that Lorrimore was still in his office, the Auster was on its way.

On arrival Biggles went straight in. "Any news of Taffy?" was his first question as the club secretary rose from his desk to greet them.

"Not a word."

Taking the photograph from his pocket Biggles went on: "I want you to look at this and tell me if you recognize anyone."

Without a moment's hesitation Lorrimore put a finger on the man on the left. "That's the man who came here for a joy-ride," he stated.

"You're sure?"

"I'd swear to it, on oath if necessary. Where did you get this? Do you know who he is?"

"All right. Don't get excited. I'll tell you all we know. He's an ex-Sergeant Pilot, R.A.F., named Chandler. As that was his name in the Service, as he'd have to show his birth certificate we can be pretty sure that's the correct one. He was chucked out for hitting the bottle too often. More recently he was an instructor at Marsdale. He lost his job there, too, for the same reason."

Lorrimore's lips tightened. "The lying swine. He told me he'd never been in the air."

"Of course he did. Pilots don't buy joy-rides. Had he told the truth you'd

have wanted to know more about him.”

“Too damn’ true I would. But what was his idea?”

“Obviously, he wanted an aeroplane. As presumably he hadn’t the money to buy one he decided to pinch one. It was too easy. In view of his record I question if he holds a civilian ticket—but I’ll check on that presently. It’s only a minor point. A feeling is growing on me that there’s more behind this than any of us at first suspected. A man doesn’t pinch an aircraft unless he has a scheme for using it.”

“You think he has pinched it?”

“What else are we to think? He may not necessarily have wanted it for his own use. There may be somebody else in the picture. After all, the machine has to be housed. Then there’s a little matter of fuel and oil. They cost money, and as Chandler seems to have poured most of his pay down his throat his notebook could hardly be bulging. Maybe that’s why he has done what he has.”

“But what about Taffy?”

Biggles shrugged. “Your guess is as good as mine.”

“What are you going to do about it?”

“Frankly, at the moment I don’t know. But you can be sure we’re not going to write the case off merely as a lost aeroplane.”

Lorrimore shook his head. “I don’t get it. Unless Chandler is out of his mind he must realize that if he uses that kite it’ll be spotted.”

“It may have changed the colour of its plumage, and its registration.”

“Yes, of course.”

“Well, that’s all for now. You’ll have to leave it to us. We shall do everything possible to get this sorted out. Meanwhile, if you hear anything let us know.”

“Of course. Right away.”

The Auster returned to its base.

“Well, and where do we go from here, old boy?” Bertie wanted to know when they were back in the office. “I can’t see that the photo has got us far.”

“As far as we could have expected. We’ve established that Taffy’s passenger was not what he pretended to be and that he was a professional pilot. We know he used a false name, and a man doesn’t do that without a good reason. Let’s look at it in the light of what we know now. Chandler didn’t want a joy-ride. He wanted an aircraft, apparently a small, light, handy machine, since he chose a Cub. His purpose? There can’t be many reasons why a man should do a thing like that. He might be a crook on the run hoping to shake off the police. That doesn’t apply to Chandler or we would have known about it. The alternative is he wanted a plane for his own use, presumably for some particular purpose.”

Ginger stepped in. “Bearing in mind the daft things he did in the Air Force you don’t think this was just another crazy lark?”

Biggles shook his head. “No. His lunatic behaviour in the Service was

done under the influence of drink. He couldn't have been drunk when he booked his flight or Lorry would have spotted it and refused to let him get in a plane. Again, don't forget that Chandler was prepared to commit a serious crime to get that aircraft, violence, or perhaps even murder for all we know. A man would hardly do that merely for the fun of it. I shall take the line that Chandler wanted a plane. He hadn't the money to buy one so he stole one. If I'm right that gives us something to work on. Assuming the machine is still airworthy we should be able to find it."

"But you said yourself it might have been repainted in different colours and given a fake registration," argued Bertie.

"Yes; but repainted by whom? Chandler couldn't get it done professionally without questions being asked. Most people in the business would recognize the Kingsmead Club colours; and by this time they should know that G-ALZX has been reported missing. No, Chandler wouldn't be such a fool as to take a chance like that."

"He could do the painting himself."

"That's a very different matter. Amateur work isn't up to professional standard. If Chandler has done it himself I'd bet any money that on close examination there are places where the original colours show, like places that are hard to reach with a brush or a spray. If the machine is still in operation a smart mechanic would be able to spot such places."

"What mechanic?"

"Any mechanic on any airfield where he lands."

"Does he have to land on an airfield?"

"Unless he's clever enough to make an aero engine run on water.

Remember, I'm assuming the machine is being used. That being so Chandler will need fuel and oil—not any old petrol, but aviation spirit. Where's he going to get it when his tanks run low? There's only one place—an aerodrome; and that's where we may catch up with him."

"That sounds like a lot of flying for us."

"Not at all. I shall send a circular letter to every refuelling station in the country asking for watch to be kept for a Piper Cub which regardless of its registration shows signs of having recently been repainted. If such a machine should land asking for petrol, an excuse must be made to hold it while we, at Scotland Yard, are informed immediately by telephone. On no account must such a machine be refuelled. Something on those lines. I shall also contact Interpol with the same request in case the machine has gone abroad." Biggles shrugged a shoulder. "I must admit it's a long shot but what else can we do? We can't cover every airfield ourselves, and to cruise around hoping to drop on the machine by accident would be an even longer shot. Chandler must know perfectly well that the Cub has been reported missing so you can reckon he'll be more than somewhat careful where and how and when he takes it up. He may only use the machine during the hours of darkness. Even by day he'd probably be wise enough to use any cloud cover available."

“That introduces another factor,” observed Bertie, polishing his monocle with thoughtful concentration. “Radar will pick him up. If he waffles across any of the regular service air corridors, by day or by night, the control rooms affected are likely to have hysterics. They’ll scream at him to get out of the way. Supposing he gets the signals, which he should, what will he do? Ignore them or alter course? If he ignores them we shall be told, that being our standing arrangement with the radar people.”

“Yes,” replied Biggles pensively. “You make a point there. Even so, I can’t see how radar would help us much. All it could do would be to give us the last known position of the intruder. At night we could do nothing about it. By day, by the time we reached the area the Cub could be miles away in any direction.”

“Radar could track him,” Ginger pointed out.

“Not if he’s as sharp as an ex-service pilot should be. If he suspected he was being tracked he’d go downhill like a bat out of hell to get under the beam. Still, it’s worth bearing in mind.”

“By the way, does Gaskin know anything about this?” queried Bertie.

“I haven’t told him—why?”

“He might help us by pushing out notices to all rural police stations asking officers on patrol to keep an eye open for a small aeroplane doing anything unusual—flying low, landing or standing in a field, for instance.”

“As I have an ugly suspicion that we may end up with a case of murder he probably wouldn’t mind doing that,” said Biggles. “I’ll speak to him about it. Anything else? No? Then I’ll draft the letter and get it sent out.”

¹ See ‘The Case of the Submerged Aircraft’ in *Biggles Presses On*.

CHAPTER III

THE TRAIL OF THE CUB

ANOTHER week passed. Biggles had done all he said he would do but so far nothing had come in from the many areas of investigation. Although not yet prepared to accept defeat he had as usual become taciturn under the influence of frustration. Over and over again he said: "What else can we do?" Nobody could provide an answer.

Then, on the eighth morning, two things happened within minutes of each other to galvanize the office into activity.

The first was a phone call from Paris, from Marcel Brissac, their astute air-Interpol colleague in France. He had rung up to say that a Piper Cub, which had declined to answer signals, had been picked up the previous night over the Plaine de la Crau north of Marseilles. It had been challenged by a searchlight but had slipped out of the beam. It had, however, been held long enough for it to be recognized as a Cub. It had not been possible to observe registration letters but it was almost certainly a British machine. It had last been heard heading north. The radar at Bron airport had tracked it for some distance beyond Lyons, on the main route. It had happened before, and if it happened again, and the pilot refused to identify himself, it might be necessary to force it down.

"What do you know about that," muttered Biggles, after he had hung up and repeated the information to the others. "Marseilles. If that's Chandler he can't have much petrol left, if any." He looked at his map, with the marked circle. "In fact, I'd say he must be getting petrol from somewhere, if the machine returned to England."

"Plaine de la Crau," murmured Ginger. "That rings a bell."

"It should. We once had a spot of bother there. Wonderful landmark for airmen. Eighty square miles as flat as a billiards table and practically nothing but sand and shingle."

"Nice place to get down if you're in trouble," remarked Bertie.

"There's nothing to suggest that the chap flying the Cub was Chandler, although it could have been," went on Biggles. "Easy place to find. The main line from Paris to the south runs right across it. Follow the railway and there you are. The same going back north."

"You don't think it's worth a visit?" suggested Ginger.

"No. We wouldn't be likely to find anything. Marcel will let us know if there's a repetition of what happened last night. Even if the pilot was Chandler it would be futile to try to guess what he was doing in that part of the world."

The possibilities were still being discussed when the telephone rang again. This time the news was more hopeful. The caller was the manager of Lysett, a

small private aerodrome near Frome, in Somerset. He had received Biggles's circular letter and put it on the notice board. One of the club mechanics, who had just returned from long weekend leave, reported that he had recently refuelled a Piper Cub which might possibly be the one the police were looking for. The registration was G-ALCK and it had recently been repainted. The pilot, who said he was the owner of the aircraft, had given the name of Captain John Maxwell. He was running short of fuel and oil. He was flying solo. The tanks had been filled right up and he had paid cash. The colour of the machine was now dark-blue all over but the wings had once been cream. This was discernible at the port wing tip which at some time had been slightly damaged and repaired. It was possible to see the original colour had been cream.

Biggles thanked the speaker for the information and said he would send someone along right away to interview the mechanic. He then related the gist of the conversation to the others who were watching with interest. He went on: "Ginger, run through the file to see if there's a Captain John Maxwell on the list of private owners. Bertie, check if there's a Cub carrying the registration G-ALCK."

As this was being done he resumed: "This sounds better. If Maxwell was Chandler he must be using a heck of a lot of petrol. Anyway, he's managed to top up his tanks."

"Nothing doing," reported Ginger, closing his card index. "No Maxwell here."

"And no Cub registered G-ALCK," said Bertie.

"That's what I thought," asserted Biggles. "Better and better. This is where we get weaving. This is the drill. Bertie, you first. You'll go to Lysett right away taking with you the photo showing Chandler. If the man who called himself Captain Maxwell was Chandler the mechanic who filled him up with petrol should recognize him. If he does turn out to be Chandler, as he got petrol there once and may come back for more. I want you to wait at the airfield until you get further orders from me. That means you'll have to stand by for all the hours of daylight."

"And if the man wasn't Chandler?"

"You can come back home. But you might try to find out what this fellow Maxwell is up to, who the plane belongs to and why it's carrying phoney registration markings. In any case, as soon as you know anything ring me up and give me the gen."

"And if Chandler does turn up—what do I do? If he calls for petrol do I let him have it?"

Biggles hesitated. "If by any chance the machine is the one that was reported in the South of France there can't be much petrol or oil left in the tanks. Which means it'll need refuelling. I think you'd better let it fill up," he decided. "I'm thinking of Taffy. If you tackle Chandler on the spot he may keep his mouth shut, in which case the only charge against him would be

taking the aircraft without the owner's permission."

"But dash it all, old boy, he'd have to account for Taffy's disappearance!"

"If he's murdered him or got him locked up somewhere he wouldn't be likely to admit it, and we couldn't charge him with that without more evidence than we have at present. We couldn't hold him for murder without producing Taffy's body. He'll have a good story ready, you may be sure, to explain how he happens to be alone with the plane. I'm not saying that he's killed Taffy, who never did him any harm, but if he has I aim to see that he swings for it. Let him have what petrol he wants and then tail him to see where he goes. He should return to wherever he's hiding the machine. You'll have to be cagey about that. If once he suspects he's being followed he'd probably manage to give you the slip—certainly if there was any cloud cover. For the rest, well, I shall have to leave it to you to act as you think best."

"Where will you be?"

"Here by the time you get to Lysett. I shall slip along to Kingsmead right away to make a double check. Lorry will know if the Cub he lost had at any time damaged its port wing. It would be entered in the book. If that turns out to be so it should confirm the Lysett report and leave us in no doubt about the plane that called there."

"Right-ho. If that's all I'll get along," said Bertie.

"There's just one other thing," said Biggles thoughtfully. "The operation is to find out where Chandler is keeping that Cub; at present just that and nothing more. For obvious reasons it won't be on an aerodrome. The only alternative is a field. Not any field, but a pasture big enough for the job. We can assume there'll be some sort of camouflage, or cover, to hide the machine when it's not in use. If, as we hope, Chandler shows you where it is, you won't land, of course. Sheer off, but mark it well so that you'll be able to find it again. That may not be as easy as it sounds sitting here. It won't be close to a town or village where there are always people about. In open farm country grass fields all look alike, unless you happen to know the ground well. If there happens to be a conspicuous landmark so well and good; but if there isn't, as you know, it's even possible to miss a small landing field, which is why in the early days we started marking them in the middle with a white circle. It might not be a bad idea, if you do find Chandler's field, to mark it with something."

"Such as?"

"In the old days of war flying we used to mark enemy gun batteries and other targets with a small paper bag of flour, or french chalk, which is usually to be found in a machine shop. The bag bursts when it hits the ground and makes a white spot. It's only noticed if you happen to be looking for it."

"I hardly think that'll be necessary, old boy, but I'll take a bag along with me in case of accidents," said Bertie lightly. "If that's all I'll press on." He departed on his mission.

Ginger grimaced at Biggles. "This begins to look pretty black for Taffy."

Biggles agreed. "Dead or alive we've got to find him," he said grimly. "It's

lucky he wasn't married, or by this time his wife would be screaming her head off, and not without reason. But let's run down to Kingsmead and hear what Lorry has to say."

They found him on the tarmac, and again Biggles' first question was: "Any news?"

"Not a word," answered Lorrimore lugubriously. "You heard anything?"

"Yes, but it's a bit early to say how much our information is worth. We're following it up. That's why we're here. I have a question to put to you. Did the missing Cub ever suffer some damage to its port wing tip?"

Lorrimore looked surprised at the question. "Why, yes. Only three weeks ago a pupil dented it taking the machine out of the hangar in too much of a hurry. How did you know?"

"I didn't know but I thought it likely. A Cub painted dark-blue, with dud registration, has landed at Lysett, in Somerset, for petrol. The port wing tip had recently had a knock."

"That's it!" cried Lorrimore.

"Perhaps, but not necessarily," returned Biggles cautiously. "It's easy to buckle a wing tip."

"Who brought the Cub in?"

"A man who said his name was Maxwell."

"Could that have been true?"

"I suppose so. I've taken steps to find out."

"You think it was Chandler using yet another name?"

"I do."

"Was he—flying solo?"

"He was."

"Then where's Taffy?"

Biggles shook his head. "It's no use asking me."

"Did Lysett let the Cub have petrol?"

"Of course. Why not? It was filled up."

"Then the machine must have done a devil of a lot of flying since it left here," stated Lorrimore trenchantly.

"I've had a report from France that a Cub which refused to identify itself was over Provence last night."

"Provence! For God's sake—"

"Don't ask me what it was doing. It may not have been your machine, anyway."

"If it was it looks as if it's gone for good."

"I don't think so. It was last heard heading north. It was tracked as far as Bron airport so there's reason to suppose, if it was Chandler, that he was on his way back to this country. We may soon know. One of my chaps is already on the way to Lysett in case the Cub that called there for petrol comes back for more. Don't worry too much. I'm certain of one thing. If Chandler imagines he can aviate a stolen aircraft indefinitely he must be drunk or crazy."

He might do it once or twice, but if he goes on we shall catch him. I must admit that the job of finding Taffy is likely to be more difficult.”

“If it’s my Cub that went to France what could have been its object?”

“I can think of several reasons. It may have taken somebody over and dropped him off there. It may have picked up a load of contraband and brought it here. Anything. There would be no difficulty. Behind Marseilles there’s a natural airfield big enough to take a squadron of jets with room to spare. But I mustn’t stay nattering here. I’m expecting a phone call from Lysett. I’ll let you know if there are further developments.”

“Thanks.”

Biggles turned away. “So long.”

The Auster returned to its base.

“This is where we wait for word from Bertie,” said Biggles, as he sat by the telephone and lit a cigarette. “I have high hopes. Barring a coincidence it’s almost certain that the Cub which landed at Lysett is the one we’re looking for.”

The call from Bertie came through an hour later. The report caused no surprise. It told them what they were so anxious to know. The mechanic who had refuelled the Cub had had no hesitation in identifying, on the photograph, the pilot who had flown it as the man who had said his name was Captain Maxwell.



The call from Bertie came through an hour later

“So it *was* Chandler,” Biggles told Ginger in a quick aside.

The only other information the mechanic had been able to give Bertie was, Maxwell—or Chandler as he appeared to be—had volunteered the statement that he had recently bought the machine second-hand. He was now getting the “feel” of it. For the time being he was keeping it at home, being a landowner

with plenty of ground not far away. He had not mentioned an address or given any indication of where his estate might be. That was all. He, Bertie, had made the necessary arrangements to stand by to watch for the Cub should it return for more petrol. He would ring again if he had anything fresh to report. If he did not come through personally, as might happen if he had to act quickly, Grant, the aerodrome manager would do so for him, to report what had happened. Grant knew all about it. He had explained the position to him.

“So far so good,” said Biggles, when he had rung off.

“You’re not thinking of going to Lysett yourself?” questioned Ginger.

“I don’t think so—not yet, anyhow. As things stand we could do no more than Bertie should be able to do alone, so there’s really no point in it. Too many people hanging about might make Chandler suspicious, and if he should take fright we could lose him. Moreover, we told Bertie we would be here. If he happened to come through again while we were on our way to Somerset it might throw things out of gear. It’s dangerous to change a plan halfway through an operation. We may not get another chance like this so I’d rather not take any risks of upsetting it.”

“What’s wrong with grabbing the machine, and Chandler, if he should land?”

“We’ve discussed that before. It isn’t enough. We must give him enough rope to lead us to where he’s keeping the machine, because that’s the only way we shall find out what’s become of Taffy. Chandler told the mechanic he was keeping the machine on his own ground. Certainly he must be hiding the Cub somewhere when it’s not in use, but I question if the ground is his own property. From what we know of him he’d hardly be likely to own an establishment with a field big enough to land in. Where would he get the money?”

“He’s getting money from somewhere, apparently, or he couldn’t have been able to pay cash for the petrol he bought at Lysett.”

Biggles nodded. “I hadn’t overlooked that. It implies he’s not running a racket on his own account. He must have somebody behind him, to finance him.”

“The man who owns the landing ground he’s using.”

“It begins to look like that. It wouldn’t surprise me. I had half suspected something of the sort.” Biggles looked at his watch. “I’ll slip out and get some lunch. We’d better not both go out together. You stay by the phone in case Bertie comes through again. I shan’t be long. When I come back I’ll take over while you get a snack.”

Biggles was away for less than an hour. He returned to find a call had come through from Lysett, although not from Bertie. It was Grant, the aerodrome manager, speaking for him. What he had to say was brief and to the point. The gist of it was, the wanted Cub had just landed for fuel and oil. Its tanks were nearly empty. The same man, thought to be Chandler, was flying it, again solo. The fuel had been supplied and, as before, paid for in cash. It had then

taken off with Lissie following on.

“Good thing we stayed here or we shouldn’t have known anything about this till we got to Lysett,” was Biggles’ comment to Ginger. “We’d better wait here, too, because Bertie won’t waste any time getting through to us when he has something to say, and this is where he’ll expect to find us. There’s nothing we can do until we hear from him.”

“If the Cub merely dropped in to fill up and then went straight back to its hide-out that shouldn’t be long,” observed Ginger with satisfaction.

“If it does that we should soon know all the answers,” returned Biggles cheerfully. “You might as well make a dash for something to eat while the going’s good. Presently we may be too busy to think about food.”

In this, however, he was mistaken. When Ginger came in after a hurried meal there had been no further word from Lysett. Nor from Bertie, who might possibly have landed somewhere else.

When three o’clock came and the telephone remained silent Biggles was frowning. By four he was looking worried. Five o’clock found him pacing the floor, smoking cigarette after cigarette in his irritation.

“What the deuce can Bertie be doing?” he demanded at intervals.

Ginger, of course, could not provide the answer. All he could say was: “If Chandler went to the South of France last night it would explain why his tanks were empty this morning. He may be in a hurry to get back there and so prepared to risk a trip in daylight. Bertie would follow as long as his petrol lasted.”

“I suppose that could happen,” agreed Biggles. “But two trips to the South of France in twenty-four hours hardly sounds feasible to me.”

At eight o’clock, with daylight fading, he sat down and stubbed his cigarette in the ash-tray. “Something’s gone wrong,” he muttered.

CHAPTER IV

NOT IN THE PROGRAMME

IN supposing that something had gone wrong Biggles was correct. It is unlikely that he could have imagined how far it had gone wrong; which perhaps was just as well. For this Bertie was not to be blamed.

He had reached Lysett aerodrome without any bother, and having parked his Auster where it would be out of the way yet within easy reach, made himself, and his purpose, known to the aerodrome manager, a young flying enthusiast named Duncan Grant. In the office he told him the details, as far as they were known, of Taffy Welsh's disappearance, what was suspected and what was now proposed. Grant promised his full co-operation.

He sent for the mechanic who had refuelled the Cub. Bertie showed him the photograph. The man, an ex-R.A.F. fitter, instantly pointed to Chandler and said: "That's the man." Questioned further he agreed there had been a certain amount of conversation, but not much, as the pilot seemed anxious to push on. He repeated as much of it as he could remember but this yielded nothing of importance. An interesting detail was, he had gathered the impression that Maxwell—as he still called him—had had "a drink or two". However, this was nothing to do with him.

All this Bertie passed to Biggles over the telephone, the chief item, of course, being the confirmation that Maxwell was Chandler, so the Cub he was flying must without doubt have been the missing machine. This done, having seen his Auster refuelled, he made himself comfortable in a deck-chair on the veranda of the clubhouse, a position from which he could see everything that went on, although being mid-week the aerodrome was quiet.

He was prepared for a long wait, possibly for some days, but as he had arranged for meals and accommodation at the club this did not worry him. It was nothing new. In the course of his flying life, like most pilots he had spent many hours doing what he was doing now, just sitting looking at an aerodrome in the hope that something interesting would happen. Grant stayed with him for a while and then returned to his office to get on with some work. It was a fine day, warm, with intermittent sunshine, the sky being about a quarter covered by slow-moving cumulus cloud.

Within twenty minutes the purr of a light plane flying low brought him to the alert, and his eyes turned to the direction from which it was coming. He recognized a Cub. He could hardly believe that so soon it was the machine for which he was waiting, but as it glided in to land, and he noted the registration letters, he saw to his great satisfaction that it was. He stood up, leaning in a casual attitude against the veranda rail, while the machine taxied slowly to the petrol filling station, where it stopped. The airscrew died. The mechanic to whom Bertie had spoken appeared from the hangar in which he had been

working. The pilot of the Cub jumped down, and after a few words the business of refuelling began.

Bertie strolled over. He wanted to see the pilot's face and there seemed to be no reason why he shouldn't. In the circumstances the man, even if he was Chandler, could hardly suspect him of being anything but a casual visitor.

It was Chandler. He wore a tweed suit, flying cap, and goggles which he had pushed up. He greeted Bertie with a nod, as one airman to another.

"Nice day," observed Bertie carelessly. "Coming in for a drink?" What he hoped to gain by this should the invitation be accepted he really didn't know, but he thought there was just a chance Chandler might let something drop.

Anyway, the offer was declined. "No thanks. I'm in a hurry to get on," was the reply.

Bertie's eyes wandered along the leading edge of the port plane to the tip. "Going far?" he inquired.

"No. Just a practice cross-country," answered Chandler. "What are you doing here?"

"Same as you. Putting in a little flying time. I dropped in here thinking I might run into somebody I knew. I shall be pushing along myself presently." Bertie made this last remark in anticipation of Chandler seeing him in the air in the near future.

That was all. The mechanic fetched the bill from the office. Chandler paid it in cash, and getting back into his seat started up. Then, with a wave, he taxied into position to take off. The mechanic signalled the sky was clear.

Bertie was already walking towards his Auster. He could see Grant watching from the door of the office. He frowned disapproval as the Cub took off in an unnecessarily steep climbing turn. Another moment and Bertie was in his seat with the engine running. He put his little bag of french chalk handy beside him, waited until the Cub was over the distant trees that ringed the aerodrome and then took off to follow it.

As soon as he was in the air he could see the Cub perhaps a mile ahead, flying level at a height of about a thousand feet, which was well below the clouds. Bertie of course had not the remotest idea of how far the chase would go, but as apparently the Cub did not intend to climb any higher he thought it could be no great distance. The fact that the Cub was keeping well below the clouds made his task easier. He realized that Chandler might see him if he looked at his reflector but that could not be avoided. Anyway, there was no reason why both machines should not be flying the same or a similar course.

Actually, Bertie would have preferred to take advantage of the cover offered by the clouds, but they were at least three thousand feet higher and he dare not risk falling too far behind, as would happen if he climbed up to them. Knowing only too well how easy it is to lose a machine in the sky when it cannot be heard for the noise made by one's own engine he resolved not to take his eyes off the Cub.

It is true that from time to time he snatched a glance at the ground in the

hope of picking up a landmark he knew and thus check his whereabouts; but the country was mostly well-wooded farm land without a conspicuous feature, so all he knew was his course was south-south-west. He had maps, but there was no time to study them. Picturing the atlas he perceived that he would soon be over Dorset, if indeed he had not already crossed the county boundary. He could see the rolling Dorset Heights in the distance.

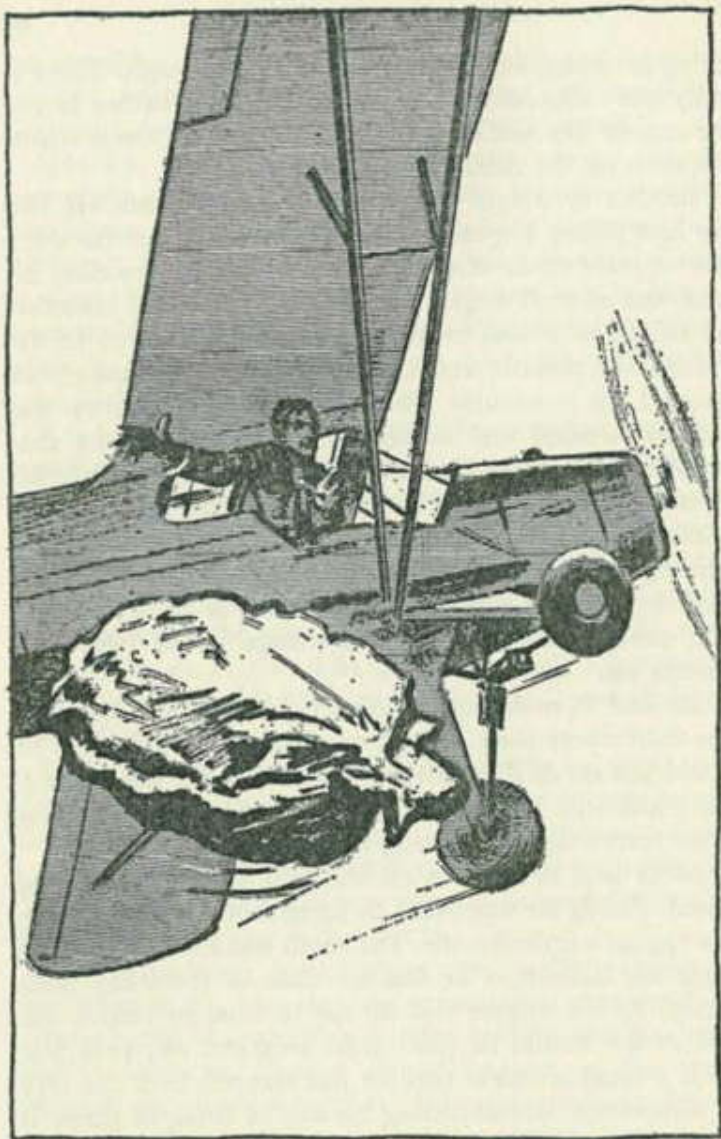
For a few minutes the Cub flew straight on, so it was obvious that Chandler knew exactly where he was going. Then two things happened together. The Cub appeared to be slowly losing height when the Auster's engine backfired. A swift look at his rev. counter showed Bertie the needle quivering and falling back.

He was shocked. Aero engines are usually reliable, as they have to be, but they do occasionally give trouble, although this is something a pilot seldom thinks about until it happens. That it should happen at this vital moment was infuriating but there was nothing Bertie could do about it. An aeroplane engine cannot be examined in flight like the engine of a motor-car on the ground. A pilot's revolution indicator tells him if some thing is wrong, but nothing more. It is enough. There is only one thing for him to do—go down. Whether or not he can do this without damaging himself or the machine depends on the nature of the ground below.

Bertie's eyes went over the instrument panel. He saw he had plenty of petrol. He winced as another back-fire sent a little cloud of smoke or petrol vapour swirling aft and the aircraft began vibrating. He had no intention of risking a serious crash even for Chandler, so he retarded the throttle and began a quick inspection of the ground for a suitable place to land. The country was thickly wooded and at first he could see nothing that satisfied him. In doing this he had of course to take his eyes off the Cub. When he looked up it had gone. It took him some precious seconds to find it. Then he spotted it gliding in to land in a long pasture about a mile in front; and that, for the moment, was as much as he had time to see, except that he noticed a village about two miles farther on.

He had to make up his mind quickly. Could he reach the field where the Cub had now landed? He thought he could just do it. The advisability of this did not occur to him, although in fact he now had little choice. He was concerned only with getting down without a crash.

So he held straight on for the field, just holding flying speed. Seeing he was likely to undershoot he tried giving the engine a little throttle. The result was more smoke and such vibration that he lost no time in throttling back again. As the engine was no use to him, to reduce the risk of fire should he pile up he switched off; so it was with a dead airscrew that he just scraped over the tops of some trees. Remembering his bag of chalk he threw it out of the open side window and then touched down almost on the track made by the Cub, ending his run within yards of it Chandler had got out and was standing by his machine, watching him.



Remembering his bag of chalk, he threw it out of the open side window.

Bertie sat still, to recover from what, for any pilot, is an unnerving

moment. But that didn't prevent him from thinking, and thinking fast, as for the first time he realized fully the position in which he had put himself by landing at what presumably was Chandler's hiding-place. One of his first thoughts was, how could he let Biggles know what had happened, for he seemed to be some distance even from a village where there would be a telephone. From which it may be gathered that he was not particularly alarmed by his immediate prospects.

He would not willingly have landed in the field, but having done so it seemed to offer possibilities. His job had been to locate the Cub's hide-out. This he thought he had done, but he did not fail to perceive that he had gone a lot farther than Biggles intended.

Looking around he observed, at the far end of the field, a large red brick house. It fell short of being a mansion but it was a biggish place, with outbuildings, as if it was, or had been, a prosperous farm. He could see no road, so apparently it approached the house from the opposite direction.

Seeing Chandler now walking towards him he got out, smiling bleakly, and unfastened the chin strap of his flying cap.

"So it's you again," said Chandler, in a curious tone of voice.

"It's me all right—but only just," confirmed Bertie. "I don't mind telling you I thought I'd had it." Actually, this was not far from the truth.

"Why did you land here?"

"Why?" Bertie looked pained. "Are you kidding? With my engine rocking on its bearers I was thundering glad to get on the carpet anywhere. I should have had a rough passage if, at the last jiffy, I hadn't spotted you going down just in front of me. I thought—well, where he can get his wheels on the floor so can I. So here I am." He looked at the nose of the Auster from which a wisp of smoke was rising, indicating clearly that the engine was overheated.

"I heard you making heavy weather of it," returned Chandler, bending down to look under the engine cowling. Pointing, he went on: "There's your trouble. She's dripping oil. Looks like a fractured oil lead, or maybe just a joint loose."

"That's capital," said Bertie, with cutting sarcasm. "It looks as if I shall be here for some time. Do you happen to know the nearest telephone? Unless there's anywhere nearer I'll ring Lysett and ask them to send along someone who can fix me up."

"Yes, sure," said Chandler vaguely, as if he was thinking.

"Who lives at the big house?" prompted Bertie. "They should be on the phone."

"It happens to be owned by an uncle of mine," answered Chandler, after a long pause. "I dropped in to look him up. You can't do anything with the machine as it is. I'll take you to the house and we'll see what can be done about it. It should be a fairly simple job."

Bertie was aware of this but he did not say so. What he said was: "Thanks a lot. That's most kind of you."

“I might even be able to fix the oil leak myself,” volunteered Chandler. “I know a bit about engines.”

As Chandler had been a sergeant fitter in the R.A.F. Bertie did not need to be told this, either.

“You walk on,” said Chandler. “I shall bring my Cub along and put it near one of the barns in case I’m persuaded to stay the night.”

“Fair enough.” Bertie started walking towards the house, a matter of a hundred yards.

It can be imagined what his thoughts were at this juncture. He was by no means happy to put himself completely into the hands of a man of Chandler’s character but he could hardly decline the invitation without arousing his suspicions. What reason could he give? He doubted if there was one that would sound convincing. There was this about it. He felt confident that up to the moment the man suspected nothing. After all, the forced landing had been genuine enough. Having seen it happen Chandler could not question that. The smoking engine could not have been faked, and no pilot would have risked such a landing as he had made unless it had been absolutely necessary.

Of course, Bertie’s main concern was to get his report off to Biggles, but he didn’t feel inclined to walk away leaving his aircraft in the hands of a man like Chandler. A delay was therefore unavoidable. He consoled himself with the thought that what had happened might be turned to his advantage. He would see something of the house and who occupied it. But he was aware that the situation bristled with dangers and he would have to keep his wits about him.

As he saw it the position should work out something like this. He would speak to Lysett on the telephone giving his address, which he would learn at the house, and ask for an engineer to be sent along at once to do the necessary repair work. The man would probably come by car, but as Grant knew the circumstances there was just a chance that he might be flown over. Standing in the middle of a field the Auster would be plain enough to see. Even if Grant didn’t answer the phone personally he would be told what had happened and have the intelligence to pass word on to Biggles.

At the worst, Bertie pondered, he would merely be stuck where he was for a few hours; but provided he could get away before dark that wouldn’t really matter. So taking things by and large he was not seriously worried by the way things had turned out.

Reaching a wicket gate that opened into a much overgrown vegetable garden he watched Chandler taxi the Cub to a big empty hay barn in the corner of the field nearest the house. At the same time he took the opportunity of surveying thoroughly the field and the land around it. The field itself was of fair size, level, but rather long and narrow, so that landings would be affected by the direction of a wind of any force. It was all right for a small, light-powered aircraft, in the hands of a capable pilot, but it was not the sort of place that could be adapted for a general purpose aerodrome. The surrounds

were too thickly wooded; indeed, trees, large and small, isolated and in groups, lined the hedges on all sides, and these would always be a hazard for a novice. Moreover, the meadow was low-lying, which meant that in bad weather it would not be easy to find. It was not the sort of place where anyone would expect to find an airfield, although this probably suited Chandler and may have been one of the reasons why it had been chosen. One would certainly have to be familiar with the general layout before attempting a night landing. Bertie noted the grass was short, as if it was well grazed.

Satisfied with his inspection he waited for Chandler to join him and they went on together up the garden path to what was obviously the back door of the house.

“What’s the name of this place?” asked Bertie, with affected carelessness.

“I just call it The Farm,” answered Chandler, in the same manner.

“How shall I know where to tell the repair people to come?”

“Leave it to me. I’ll deal with that when we get inside. No doubt you can do with a drink,” Chandler went on quickly, switching the subject. He opened the door of the house like a man who is at home and went straight on through a large untidy kitchen, where a gaunt, sourfaced woman was doing something to a door on the far side. This opened into a sitting-room furnished with some degree of comfort.

A heavily-built man of about sixty years of age reclined in an arm-chair smoking a thin black cigar. He wore large, horn-rimmed spectacles, from behind which strikingly pale-blue eyes regarded Bertie with a disconcerting stare. His face was square, broad and flat, rising to a domed forehead from which the hair had receded. Apart from a small tuft of grey beard he was clean shaven. He expressed no surprise at seeing Chandler who said, brightly, “Hello, Uncle,” with an accent on the word Uncle.

The older man, still looking at Bertie, inquired: “Who is this?”

“I’ll tell you about him in a moment,” replied Chandler. “Come through to the other room. I have some news for you.” Over his shoulder to Bertie, as he walked to another door, he said: “Excuse me a moment. I won’t keep you long.”

Both men went out leaving Bertie alone. He thought this was rather odd behaviour but he was in no position to question it. He looked round for a telephone, but not seeing one sat down, feeling a little uncomfortable. There was something about the atmosphere of the place he didn’t like.

When ten minutes had elapsed and the two men had not returned he had become definitely uneasy. What was going on? Had he been mistaken in supposing Chandler’s suspicions had not been aroused? Remembering what had happened to Taffy was a plan being made to dispose of him? He got up and walked to a window which he thought would overlook the back garden and the field beyond. It did. As he looked his lips came together in a tight line. The Auster was not where he had left it. In fact, he couldn’t see it. He polished his eye-glass and surveyed the hedges that bounded the meadow.

That settled it. The Auster had gone.

The odd thought struck him, what a fool he would feel if in looking for a stolen aeroplane he lost his own.

CHAPTER V

A PROPOSITION

BERTIE had turned back into the room, bracing himself for trouble, when Chandler and his elderly companion returned.

“What have you done with my aeroplane?” he demanded coldly, determined to let them see he took a poor view of this unwarranted liberty with his property.

Chandler must have expected the question for the answer came readily. “Some bullocks are being turned into the field and it was thought advisable to move it in case they damaged it. They’re devils, you know, for rubbing themselves against anything handy.”

Bertie didn’t know, and he didn’t believe a word of it, although in fact this is true. He looked back at the window, and it was with mixed feelings that he saw a line of cattle walking through a gate into the field. “Look here, I say, was it necessary to put cattle in the field while my machine was there?” he asked.

“I suppose it wasn’t really, but the farm-hand wouldn’t know that. The cattle are the easiest way to keep the grass short.”

“Where have you put the Auster?”

“With my Cub. In the barn. It’ll be all right there.”

“How am I going to take off with bullocks wandering all over the bally place?”

“I’ll have them turned off when the time comes. That’s likely to be some time yet.”

“I suppose so. I’d like to get on with it, so now may I use the telephone?”

Chandler made a wry face. “I’m sorry, but at the moment it happens to be out of order. That’s why I’ve been so long. I had to find a chap to go on a bicycle to the nearest phone box, to let the post office people know. Don’t worry, they should soon have it working. While you’re waiting you might as well make yourself comfortable and have a drink. What shall it be—gin, whisky, sherry...?”

“I’ll take a glass of sherry, thanks,” accepted Bertie, without enthusiasm. He was thinking of other things, and thinking fast. This, obviously, was going to be more difficult than he had imagined.

Chandler produced the drinks from the sideboard, giving himself, Bertie noted, a stiff whisky. “Let me introduce my uncle,” he said smoothly. “I’ve told him about your forced landing. But how stupid of me! I don’t know your name. Mine’s Maxwell. John Maxwell. My uncle—Doctor Paul Hammal.”

The old man nodded.

“My name’s Lissie,” informed Bertie.

“Good. Now we know each other. Do sit down.” Bertie found a chair.

Chandler sat opposite. "From the way you brought your Auster in I'd say you've been flying for some time."

"Quite a while," admitted Bertie.

"In the Air Force?"

"During the war. I packed up when it was all over."

"But you're still flying."

"Why not?"

"It's expensive."

"Not too expensive."

"You must have plenty of money."

"Enough."

"Is that Auster your own machine?"

"No. It belongs to a concern in which I have an interest."

"Where have you just come from?"

"Lysett. You saw me there."

"I meant before that?"

"From London. Gatwick to be precise."

"Where were you going?"

While these were perfectly natural questions as between one airman and another Bertie felt sure they were leading up to something, or why was he deliberately being detained? Of that he was in no doubt. The turning of the cattle into the field had been an excuse to move the Auster. Was that because Chandler didn't want a machine to be seen on the ground near the farm? It seemed likely that cattle were usually kept in the field when Chandler did not want to use it as a landing ground, because that would not only hinder other machines from landing but would prevent any pilot flying over from suspecting the field was ever used for such a purpose. The allegation that the phone was out of order, which he did not believe, was merely another excuse for keeping him there. So ran Bertie's thoughts, swiftly, as he waited for the next development.

Chandler went on, as if making casual conversation to pass the time:

"What do you do for a living?"

Bertie forced a sort of apologetic smile. "Matter of fact, I don't have to do anything."

"You mean, you're independent?"

"I own some property in the country the rents of which produce enough petty cash to keep me out of the National Assistance queue."

"Very nice, too. Still, I suppose you could do with more."

"Who couldn't?" Bertie thought it time he asked a question. "How do you manage to afford to waffle around in your own aircraft?"

Chandler smiled broadly. "Me? Oh, I make a living at it."

"Really? How do you do that?"

"It's easy when you know how."

"How interesting. I'd like to know how you do it."

Chandler glanced at the doctor who spoke for the first time. "I do a certain amount of business abroad. Freight charges by any form of transport are so high that it isn't easy to show a profit. Moreover, most services are slow, as well as being unreliable; so my nephew sometimes accommodates me by using his own plane."

The old man spoke perfect English, but Bertie detected the merest trace of foreign accent. It was too slight to reveal the man's original nationality. Few people can speak another language well enough to pass as a national of that country.

"I see," said Bertie, slowly. "But doesn't overseas flying involve you in a lot of trouble—umpteenth forms to fill in, and all that nonsense?"

"Not the way I do it," murmured Chandler, with a sly smile.

"You mean—you skip the formalities?"

"Exactly. They serve no useful purpose. All they do is provide jobs for a lot of useless officials."

"But look here, that's a bit risky, you know. If you were caught at that you'd get it in the neck."

"I take care not to get caught. If there is a slight risk, which I must admit, the money I save would more than pay the fine."

"How do you get away with it?"

"It's only a matter of having the know-how. I come and go as I like, usually at night. What's to stop me?"

Bertie affected an expression of disapproval. "You're not by any chance talking about smuggling?"

"You can call it smuggling if you like. There's nothing unusual in that. You know as well as I do that practically every tourist who goes abroad for a holiday tries to diddle the Customs Officer. So what? It doesn't matter whether the article is worth five pounds or five thousand, the principle is the same. A dear old lady bringing in an undeclared bottle of perfume is breaking the law just as much as I am. So what? Either you break the law or you don't. If you do you're a crook—and there are few people today who could swear on oath they'd never broken the law. There's no degree of law-breaking. The man who bought petrol coupons under the counter when the stuff was rationed broke the law just as much as a boy who pinched half a crown out of the till."

Bertie had to admit there was truth in this.

"Well," went on Chandler. "Now you know, do you feel like having a nibble? We've got everything laid on."

Bertie did not answer at once. The situation called for thought. To refuse forthwith to co-operate would, he was sure, lead to trouble. To accept too quickly would look suspicious. He needed time. One thing was certain. These men, having told him so much, would never let him go. It never had been intended to let him go. Even though they did not know who and what he was they would be well aware that almost any pilot, civil or military, would report such a conversation as this to the police. He decided that if he pretended to

accept the offer he would have a better chance of getting away than if he declined. If he refused—well, anything might happen. Taffy may have been asked the same question, and what had become of him?

“Make up your mind,” prompted Chandler.

“Don’t rush me,” countered Bertie. “Coming out of the blue, so to speak, one needs a little time to consider a proposition like this.”

“You can make a couple o’ hundred quid a trip.”

“What I don’t understand is this,” returned Bertie, still employing delaying tactics. “If you can make money as easily as you say you can, why let me in on it?”

“That’s a reasonable question and the answer is simple. Two aeroplanes can do more than one. Your Auster can seat four, my Cub only two. One day I may need a three or four-seater.¹ Moreover, once in a while a machine needs a complete overhaul, and while it’s unserviceable the organization is held up. Another thing. I use a lot of petrol, and as I haven’t a pump of my own I have to be careful how I get it.”

“You got petrol at Lysett.”

“I know; Lysett happens to be handy, but I can’t go there too often. If I overdid it some smart alec might wonder what I was doing with so much petrol. Two machines would make refuelling easier. They could ring the changes at different petrol stations.”

“Hm, I see that. How did you get the Cub?”

“I bought it,” lied Chandler glibly.

“Any reason why you shouldn’t buy another?”

“Yes.”

“What?”

“I couldn’t. I’ve lost my licence.”

“Then how did you get the Cub?”

“I bought it before they took my ticket off me.”

“Don’t they know you still have the Cub?”

“No. Officially it crashed, and was written off.”

Chandler was certainly slick with his answers, thought Bertie. “Just as a matter of interest, what happens if I refuse to play?” he inquired.

“You won’t—if you’re wise.”

“Ah. Like that, eh.”

“It’d come to the same thing,” went on Chandler, no longer smiling. “I should still have two aeroplanes to work with. The only difference would be I’d have to put in more time in the air. I’d like a rest sometimes while someone else did the work.”

“Meaning that you’re going to have my Auster, anyway.”

“You’re keeping pace with the argument.”

“Aren’t you afraid I might go to the police and spill the beans?”

“No. You’d be in no case to spill the beans to anyone—and you wouldn’t do any more flying.”

Bertie looked hurt. "Here, I say, you know, that's pretty forthright."

"I try to speak plainly without beating about the bush."

"You certainly do that. Now tell me this. Suppose I agreed to come into this fascinating venture what is there to prevent me, when I get my hand on a joystick again, from flying off and not coming back?"

"That couldn't happen."

"Why not?"

"Because I should be in the plane with you."

"In which case you might as well do all the flying yourself."

"Not at all. I should only do the first trip with you. What happened would incriminate you to the extent of making you one of us. From then on we should all be in the same boat."

Bertie looked amused. "In other words, I should be one of the gang."

"That's right. But we don't use the word gang. It sounds cheap and nasty."

"You certainly have all the answers ready. What line of merchandise do you deal in, if you don't mind me asking?"

"That depends on what our customers have to offer. We're not particular."

I'll bet you aren't, thought Bertie. "If I came in with you, how do I know I'd get paid?"

The old man spoke. "Perhaps you'd like something in advance." He got up, walked to a desk and from a drawer took a thick wad of notes. "Help yourself," he invited, tossing it on the table.

Bertie looked at it. A grin spread over his face. "That's more money than I've seen in one lump for a long time, and I must say it looks very attractive," he conceded. He didn't touch it. "I prefer to have my wages when I've earned them," he said.

"There's plenty more where that came from."

"Well, what about it," said Chandler, now a trifle impatiently.

"I'll tell you what," replied Bertie, who had already made up his mind to accept. "This proposition of yours is a new line to me. Would you mind if I took a little while to think it over, to satisfy myself there are no snags?"

The old man answered. "Take all the time you want. There's no desperate hurry."

"Does that mean I can move off and give you my answer later?"

"Oh, come off it," jibed Chandler. "Do we look as dumb as all that?"

"Frankly, no," admitted Bertie. "I didn't seriously think you meant that but I thought it worth a try—if you get my meaning. Very well. What do I do?"

"Stay here. We have some spare rooms." Chandler smiled again, cynically. "You'll get all home comforts, wonderful food. This is a farm, you know. The eggs are fresh, the butter comes from a cow and the vegetables fresh from the garden. What more do you want?"

"Nothing."

"Good. Come with me and I'll show you your room. I'm sure you have more sense than to do anything silly—such as trying to leave us without

saying good-bye or thanking us for our hospitality.” As he spoke Chandler allowed his jacket to fall open far enough to reveal a revolver in a shoulder holster.

“Good lor’!” exclaimed Bertie. “Why do you carry that thing about? Must be jolly uncomfortable stuck under your armpit. Are you afraid of somebody, or something?”

“No, I’m not afraid,” returned Chandler, blandly.

“Extraordinary,” murmured Bertie.

“No more extraordinary than you wearing a window in your face,” retorted Chandler, rather rudely. “Do you have to wear that thing?”

“Not really, but it saves me having to look for a pair of spectacles, or grope in my pocket for them, when I want to look at something very small.”

“Such as?”

“Threading a fresh fly on a gut cast. Jolly handy when you’re standing in a river.”

“You a fisherman?”

“When I get a chance.”

“Ever catch anything?”

“Quite often. You’d be surprised what I catch.”

“Good. This way.” Chandler opened a door and they went through to a corridor which brought them to the stairs. They went up to a room on the first floor. The door was opened and Bertie went in.

“You should be all right here,” said Chandler from the doorway. “Nice and quiet. Just the job for serious thinking. Ring the bell if you want anything. See you later.” He retired, closing the door behind him. A key turned softly in the lock.

Bertie took stock. It was an ordinary little room furnished cheaply but comfortably as a bed-sitting room with toilet conveniences and hot and cold water laid on. There was one window. It could be opened, as he quickly ascertained, but there was no question of escape that way. Four steel rods had been fixed horizontally across it.

Having thoroughly explored, and satisfied himself there was no immediate prospect of getting away, he sat on the bed to think things over, uncertain whether he had made a mess of his mission or had succeeded rather too well. More by luck than judgement he had landed in Chandler’s headquarters; but whether it would turn out to be good luck or bad remained to be seen.

¹ We try to avoid technicalities but here a word of explanation may be necessary. As the reader probably knows there are several types of Auster aircraft, military and civil. Bertie was using an Auster J/1 Autocrat, a 3-4 seater which had been on the establishment of the Air Police for a long time. The standard version has one 15-gallon petrol tank, but there may also be an auxiliary tank of 10 gallons under the fuselage giving a range of 600 miles. This was the type Bertie was flying, as Chandler would know. The stolen Cub was a P.A.-18 Super Cub 95 which can be adapted for crop dusting. It has two seats in tandem. The landing gear of both machines is the fixed-wheel type. Both are fitted with dual controls. The Auster, with a

cruising speed of 110 m.p.h. is rather faster than the Cub.

CHAPTER VI

STRANGE DEVELOPMENTS

BIGGLES and Ginger stayed at the office until midnight, still hoping Bertie would come through on the telephone.

After a glance at the clock Biggles said: "It's no use. Had he been able to call us he would have done so by now. Grant, at Lysett, can't know what has happened or he'd have let us know."

"But what could have happened?"

"The Cub dropped in again for petrol; it then took off and Bertie followed it. So much we know. What happened after that is anybody's guess; but one thing is certain. Bertie hasn't been able to get to a telephone since or he'd have got in touch. I don't understand it. Either he lost sight of the Cub or he followed it to its hide-out. It must be one or the other. If he lost sight of it he would have landed somewhere and told us so. If he tracked it till it landed his orders were plain enough. Having noted the spot he was to return to Lysett and report. He hasn't done either."

"If he tracked the Cub home he wouldn't have been such a fool as to land."

"I've known him do crazy things but I can't see him deliberately acting contrary to orders. He must be on the ground somewhere because he wouldn't have enough petrol to stay in the air."

"I suppose he could have refuelled somewhere."

Biggles shook his head. "No, that isn't the answer. Why should he, unless he had lost the Cub, in which case there was nothing to stop him from using the phone at wherever his tanks were being topped up. He's on the ground. He hasn't phoned. That can only mean he couldn't. All we're left with is a crack-up, and a bad one. Had he been able to walk he would have got to the nearest house and either phoned us himself or asked someone to do so. He would have got in touch with us somehow."

"The idea of Bertie lying piled up in a crash at this moment is pretty shattering."

"Can you think of anything else?"

"No." After a pause Ginger went on: "Hadn't we better get to Lysett?"

"And do what? There'll be nobody there at this hour. Everyone will have gone home. To look for a crash in the dark would be futile. Without a clue as to which way Bertie went it would be pretty hopeless in broad daylight. I think a better plan would be to get some sleep and go to Lysett first thing in the morning. I shall want to speak to Grant and I don't suppose he'll be at his office before nine. On the off-chance that Bertie may still come through I'll ask the switchboard operator to put calls through to the flat, and after six o'clock to Lysett. Let's go home."

And so it was that daybreak found another police Auster on its way to

Somerset. Nothing happened on the way and, as was to be expected, on arrival they found the airfield deserted except for a night watchman who was making a cup of tea. They had a cup with him. He knew nothing, so they had to control their impatience until nine o'clock, when the staff arrived. All they could say was what was already known; a Cub had been refuelled and had taken off followed by the Auster.

Grant, when he arrived, could not do much better. "Which way did the Cub go when it took off?" asked Biggles.

Grant pointed. "That way. It came in from that direction."

"You watched it?"

"For as long as it was possible."

"Did it seem to be on a steady course?"

"I'd say yes."

"At what height?"

"Not more than a thousand feet. There it levelled out and carried straight on, tail up, as if it was in a hurry to get somewhere."

"Was there much cloud about?"

"A fair amount, but well broken."

"At what height?"

"Between four and five thousand for a rough guess."

"There wasn't enough to make a compass course necessary?"

"No."

"And Lissie took off at once behind the Cub."

"Yes. The last I saw of him he was following the Cub about a mile behind."

"And that's all you can tell us."

"That's all I know."

"You haven't heard anything of an aircraft making a forced landing anywhere in the region?"

"Not a word."

"Had that happened you'd have heard about it?"

"Probably. The police would have rung up to ask if it was one of ours."

"I see. Thanks. We haven't heard a word from Lissie so I can only think he must be down somewhere. We'll have a look round. I shall drop in from time to time to see if there's a message."

"Fair enough. I shall be here."

Biggles turned to Ginger. "Let's see what the luck's like."

They got into the Auster, took off, and at five hundred feet followed the line, at cruising speed, taken by the Cub as pointed out by Grant. Biggles studied the ground one side and Ginger the other.

"I wonder did Bertie take the bag of chalk you suggested," conjectured Ginger.

"He said he would; but if he did, whether or not he used it is another matter. We'll bear it in mind. If you see a white spot, or a fleck of white, tell

me, and we'll have a look at it."

Five minutes passed. Then Ginger said: "The question is, how far did he go?"

"If he maintained his course he couldn't have gone a great distance. That high ground on the horizon must be Dorset, and beyond that is the Channel."

"He might have gone beyond the coast."

"I doubt it. Had Chandler intended going to France surely he would have taken a shorter sea route. The Channel is wide here."

The search was continued until the English Channel came into view but no sign of a plane on the ground was seen.

"There's no point in going on," said Biggles, turning back. "If Bertie crossed the Ditch we shall have to wait until we hear from him, and that's all there is to it. Personally I don't think he did. We covered a very narrow track coming here, but that's all that would have been necessary had the Cub flown a dead straight line, in which case Bertie would have done the same. We'll take in a bit wider area on the way back."

This was accomplished simply by flying a serpentine course which took in more ground although it meant doubling the distance. Over thickly wooded areas Biggles dropped off some altitude and occasionally circled or described a figure of eight. This allowed the ground to be examined more thoroughly and from close range.

Suddenly Ginger called out: "I can see something white in a big field. Don't turn. I can't see anyone, but if there's somebody there we shall be watched."

Biggles, who was gliding at the time, carried straight on for some distance before he touched the throttle. "Now then; what exactly did you see?" he asked.

"A short white smudge as if something white in a bag had hit the ground and rolled as it burst open."

"Is that all?"

"That's what we've been looking for, isn't it?"

"Anything else in the field?"

"Some cattle."

"No aircraft?"

"No."

"You noted the field?"

"Of course. There's a big red brick house at the top end of the field. It looks as if it might belong to a well-to-do farmer, or perhaps the local squire. There's also a barn with a corrugated iron roof tucked in against the trees in the far corner. Why not go back and have a look at the place yourself?"

"Was this barn big enough to house an aircraft, do you think?"

"Easily."

Biggles had not turned. "I'm not going back," he decided. "If what you saw was Bertie's marker he must have had good reason for putting it there. If

so, we'd do better to keep clear. An aircraft circling low over the field would make anyone down there wonder what it was doing. I feel more inclined to check up on this white thing you saw from ground level. What puzzles me is, if the field is being used for landings what the devil are cattle doing in it? That doesn't make sense."

"The cattle may only be put in when the field isn't being used as a landing ground."

"That's possible."

While this conversation was going on Biggles was flying straight for Lysett. Presently he said: "It's a queer business. We were looking for a white mark in a big field, and not only have we found one but it's where it should be, right on the track taken by the Cub. If that's a coincidence it's a remarkable one. If what you saw was a marker put down by Bertie where did he go afterwards? Let's suppose the Cub did land on that field. All Bertie had to do was mark it, return to Lysett and phone me. Why didn't he? What else could he have done? It doesn't add up. There's something very odd about the whole business."

"The only thing I can think of is he landed somewhere not far away with the intention of having a look round on the ground."

"You suggested that before. No, I can't see him doing that. In any case, if that's the answer where's his machine?"

"He may have damaged it on landing."

"If so it would still be where he touched down and we should have seen it. If for any reason he went down and couldn't get off again it wouldn't take him more than three hours to get to Lysett if he had to walk all the way. From where you saw the white spot to Lysett can't be more than ten or a dozen miles. But we may be barking up the wrong tree altogether. A closer look at the field should settle that one way or the other."

The Auster had now reached the airfield. Biggles landed, and having taxied close to the office, switched off.

As they got down Grant came out. "Any luck?"

"I can't say for certain," answered Biggles. "We didn't find an aircraft but we saw something interesting. I want to have a closer look at it on the ground. Where's the nearest place I can hire a car?"

"There's no need for you to hire one. Why not use mine?"

"I may be away some time. When do you usually knock off?"

"About six. But that doesn't matter. If you're not back by then one of the boys will run me home. I don't live far away."

"That's noble of you. I'll remember it if you ever need help from me. Do you do anything here in the way of food?"

"We don't do hot meals but the club steward will knock up a plate of cold meat."

"Fine. We'll have a bite and a look at the map at the same time."

"I'll bring the car round."

“Thanks a lot.”

No time was wasted over the meal and in something less than an hour Grant's car, with Biggles at the wheel, was on the road which a study of the map had shown would take them to Binfold, the nearest village to the field they proposed to visit. They were hatless, having left their flying kit in the locker room.

Some distance short of the village a roadman was at work trimming the verge. Biggles brought the car to a stop beside him. “Good afternoon,” he said cheerfully. “I wonder if you can help me. I'm making inquiries about an aeroplane. Do you work regularly on this road?”

The man said he did.

“Have you noticed an aeroplane landing in a field near here?”

“I see plenty o' planes but I can't say as I've seen one land,” was the answer, with a rich Somerset brogue.

“Did you see a plane yesterday?”

“Yes. Come to think of it I saw two, one close behind the other.”

“Were they flying low?”

“Low enough to make me look up at 'em.”

“I suppose you wouldn't know what sort of planes they were?”

“No. Planes all look alike to me.”

“Which way did they go?”

The man pointed along the road. “Straight down there.”

“Towards Binfold.”

“That's right.”

“Would they go over the village, do you think?”

“Must have done.”

“Thanks,” acknowledged Biggles. “I'm much obliged to you.” As he got back into the car and drove on he said to Ginger: “We're on the right track so far. The two machines could only have been the Cub followed by the Auster.”

Two miles on they came to the village, a single street. At the first cottage a woman was taking some washing from a line. Biggles pulled up and got out. “Excuse me, ma'am, but I'm making inquiries about a plane reported flying low over the village yesterday. Did you see it?”

“No.”

“In fact there were two planes, one flying behind the other.”

“They didn't come this way. If they had, if I didn't see them I should have heard them. I was about the place all day with the door open. I often see a plane, and hear one after I've gone to bed, but I didn't see one yesterday and I didn't hear one last night.”

“Thank you,” said Biggles, and again drove on.

At the far end of the village a man was painting the front of the public house. Once more Biggles put the questions, beginning with: “Were you working here yesterday?”

The painter, looking somewhat surprised, said he was.

“Then you must have seen two planes go over. I’m told they were flying low.”

The man shook his head. “No planes went over here yesterday. I was on the job all day so I must have seen ‘em if they had. There’s one lately taken to going over at night, making a lot o’ noise and waking folks up. It’s time someone stopped it.”

“I’ll see what I can do about it,” promised Biggles. “Thank you.”

He turned the car and drove slowly back the way he had come. “We’re not doing too badly,” he said. “We’re on the track. The two machines passed over the chap working on the road. Had they flown straight on they must have gone over the village within a couple of minutes. Apparently they didn’t, which means that the trail ended between the roadman and the village. What happened? Did they land or did they suddenly alter course?”

“If they turned it must have been at right angles or they’d have been over the village. When the roadman last saw them they were still flying straight. I’d say the Cub landed. Bertie would drop his marker. What happened to him after that I couldn’t guess; but the white flash I saw in the field comes into the two miles between the roadman and the village.”

“Right. What we have to do now is find it. That may not be so easy from the ground as it was from the air. We shall have to watch how we go. If we’re right in supposing the field is the one where the Cub landed it’s likely Chandler won’t be far away; and if he sees us messing about he’ll wonder what we’re doing.”

Biggles was right in supposing that it would take longer to find the field from ground level than it had from above. In fact, it took all the afternoon. Over and over again they had to leave the car to see beyond the many hedgerows and stands of timber. They dare not risk walking across open fields; they had to keep close to the hedges to reduce the possibility of being seen and all this footwork took time. As a result, evening was well on the way when at last Ginger got his bearings from the red brick house. The barn in the corner of the field confirmed it.

As they made their way cautiously along the nearest hedge to the trees that fringed the field at the lower end, Ginger remarked that he didn’t think much of the field as a landing ground.

“A Cub doesn’t need much room to get down and Chandler’s a professional pilot,” reminded Biggles.

Reaching a thin place in the hedge as near as Ginger could judge to the white mark he had seen, they crouched to peer through it. The first thing they saw was a man driving the cattle out of the field through a gate near the house. The barn stood end on to them so it was not possible for them to see inside it from their present position. Apart from the man with the cattle there was no one in sight. No wheel tracks, such as an aircraft would make, could be seen; but as Biggles pointed out it was too late in the day for that. The dew, which would show such marks, had long ago been evaporated, and bent grass would

be lifted by the sun.

"I can't see anything looking like a white spot," he said.

Ginger replied that he could just see what he had seen from the air, although from where they were it appeared more as a vague blur than an actual spot. He knew exactly where it was. As he explained, the field was after all a meadow with the usual sprinkling of buttercups and daisies, so the grass, while short, was not like a tennis court.

"The next thing is to have a look at the white stuff to see exactly what it is," said Biggles. "I don't think it would be wise to do that in daylight in full view of the house."

"So what do we do?"

"Wait for dark, or nearly dark. Meanwhile we can watch. We may see something. But it doesn't need both of us to do that. As we look like being here for some time you'd better go back to the car and put on the sidelights. At the same time you might move it a bit off the road, farther on the verge, if you can find a place."

"I'll do that," said Ginger, getting up.

"When you've done that come back here."

Ginger went off. The car was a fair distance away so it was nearly half an hour before he returned.

"Anything doing?" he asked, as he settled down beside Biggles.

"A man who must have been doing something in the barn has gone to the house. That's all."

"Chandler?"

"I wouldn't know, from this distance."

They waited, Biggles smoking a cigarette, while the day slowly gave way to dusk. A light came on in the house.

Not until visibility was down to about a hundred yards did Biggles decide it was safe to move. "Go and see what that white stuff is," he told Ginger. "You know the exact spot. Keep close to the hedge until you get opposite. With the dark background of trees behind you I don't think you could be seen from the house even if anyone was watching the field. Not that I see any reason why anyone should be watching."

Ginger moved off. He crawled through a gap. From then, while he was making his way along the inside of the hedge, Biggles lost sight of him. Then, presently, he made out a vague shadowy figure moving quickly across the open. He watched it stoop, pause, and hurry back to the hedge.

"Well?" he asked, when Ginger rejoined him. "What is it?"

Ginger showed his hands, startlingly white even in the dim light. "French chalk," he answered softly. "Feel it."

Biggles felt its smooth, oily nature, between a finger and thumb. "You're right," he agreed. "Now we know. Bertie has been here. That doesn't mean he landed. If he didn't, where on earth could he have gone after he left here? We shall have to leave that for the moment. The Cub should be here, anyway, or

he wouldn't have dropped his chalk bomb. It may be in the barn. We'll wait for it to get a little darker then we'll go and have a look."

Again they waited. "Pity there's no moon yet," observed Biggles. "No matter; we shall have to manage without one. Do you happen to have a torch in your pocket?"

"No."

"Nor me. I didn't come equipped for this sort of expedition. All right. Let's get on with it."

It was apparent that without crossing open ground they would have to go some distance to reach the barn, for it meant following the hedge to the corner of the field and then turning at right angles along another hedge. This they did, moving more slowly as they neared the objective. It was now quite dark, but the sky was clear and well sprinkled with stars. The air was still.

They had reached a point from which it was possible to see the roof of the barn silhouetted against the sky when from somewhere not far away came a sharp sound, a click, as of the latch of a gate.

Biggles stopped. They both stared in the direction from which the sound had come, which was from somewhere near the house. A light appeared, moving erratically, obviously an electric torch being carried in the hand. With this came the low murmur of voices. The light and the voices moved in the direction of the barn.

"Wait," breathed Biggles. "Maybe they won't stay long."

"It sounded like at least three people," whispered Ginger, as the light disappeared, and with it the voices ended.

Biggles agreed.

They remained where they were, eyes trying to probe the gloom; but nothing could be seen. From time to time odd sounds could be heard, but it was impossible to guess what was going on inside the barn. This went on for some minutes.

Then, suddenly and without warning, came the shattering roar of an aero engine being started. The glow of the exhaust gases moved slowly from the front of the barn into the field. Nothing else could be seen. Then came a pause. A voice called sharply. The engine bellowed as the throttle was advanced and the aircraft began its take-off run. It showed no lights.

The watchers under the hedge sprang to their feet, staring, as it passed close to them and its shape could be seen. Neither spoke. Then, as the sound receded, Ginger said in a curious voice: "That wasn't a Cub! It looked to me more like an Auster."

"It was an Auster," asserted Biggles.

"What do you make of that?"

Biggles did not answer.

A light moved from the barn to the house. A gate latch clicked. Silence fell.

It was a minute before either of them spoke. Then Ginger said: "What do

you make of that? I don't get it. Is it possible that Bertie could have been flying that Auster?"

"I suppose it's possible, but it seems mighty unlikely. Bertie would have switched on his navigation lights. I can't imagine any circumstances that would have induced him to land here, much less to wait for this hour to leave. If it comes to that we've no proof that the Auster was ours. I'd say it was Chandler, off on one of his night trips abroad. We know he pinched a Cub, and I see no reason why he shouldn't have got an Auster from somewhere."

"Still, the chalk mark can only mean that Bertie was here, so as he didn't return to Lysett he may not be far away."

"Such as where?"

"In the house."

"What would he be doing in the house?"

"We might try to find out."

"As he would hardly be there from choice, maybe we should. But there's one thing we might do before we tackle that. The Auster that's just gone off isn't out on a joy-ride. It's going somewhere definite, and if the unidentified Cub Marcel reported over the South of France was in fact Chandler's, the Auster might be on its way to the same place. Be that as it may, I ought to let Marcel know that a suspicious Auster may be on its way to France. He should be able to track it. I'll tell you what. You dash off in the car, find a telephone and get on to the Yard. Ask them to switch you through to police headquarters in Paris. If Marcel isn't there ask for a message to be sent to him, urgent. I doubt if you'll find anyone at Lysett at this hour but do what you can."

"Do I ask the French police to take any particular action?"

"No. You can say they can do what they like about it."

"Then what?"

"Come back here. I'm going to have a look at that barn. You'll find me somewhere near it. Whistle, and I'll answer."

"Okay. See you later." Ginger departed on his errand.

CHAPTER VII

NIGHT FLIGHT

BERTIE, sitting on the bed in his locked room, turning over in his mind the unexpected situation that had arisen, was not long in doubt as to the course he would have to take. Indeed, as far as he could see he had no alternative. To refuse absolutely to have anything to do with the crooked business that was being operated from the farm would not only serve no useful purpose but would in all probability prove disastrous as far as he personally was concerned. Chandler, having so blatantly, so confidently, and as it seemed to Bertie, so foolishly exposed his hand, would never dare to let him go. He would no doubt dispose of him as he had got rid of Taffy Welsh, as apparently he had, however that might have been done. No, he meditated. That was no use. Clearly, he would have to pretend to accept the proposition that had been put to him and wait for a chance to do something about it.

Naturally, at first he thought of nothing but escape, so that he could report to Biggles and leave the next step to him; but another examination of the window made it clear that there was little hope of this at present. His room, he saw, was at the back of the house, for it overlooked what had once been the kitchen garden and the landing field beyond. He would at least be able to see everything that went on.

Still pondering his problem it occurred to him that escape might not be the right answer. Unforeseen events had put him in a position to find out just what sort of racket Chandler and his associates were running, and he felt it was up to him to take advantage of it. It was obviously something highly profitable or Chandler would not be so anxious to have an assistant pilot, even though the reasons he had given for this were plausible. Was there another reason? If so he couldn't think of it.

He was thankful for one thing. He must have been taken at his face value or he would have been searched. Why hadn't he been forced to produce proof of his identity? Was this an oversight? Was it because Chandler was confident that he had him in his power; or was it because Chandler did not want to upset him before he had given his decision? At all events, it was lucky for him, because had his pockets been turned out his police pass must have been found. There were also one or two letters addressed to him at the London flat, but these were not important. In going through these he came on a note scribbled on a flimsy Scotland Yard memo. He put it in his mouth and chewed it as the easiest way of getting rid of it. The police pass, a card in a small leather holder, was more difficult. He might still be searched. If it were found the game would be up. He might need it in the near future but he daren't risk keeping it. What could he do with it? After giving the problem some thought he thrust it well down between the back and the seat of the small arm-chair

with which the apartment had been provided.

What Biggles was thinking about his failure to return he couldn't imagine. Or perhaps he could. Eventually, of course, he would make a search for him, or the Auster, but with so much ground to cover the chances of him finding the hastily discarded bag of chalk seemed remote— too remote, he feared, for him to rely on it. It would only need a shower of rain to wash the chalk into the ground, anyway, although fortunately the weather looked like remaining fine.

With nothing to do except think he wondered exactly what illegal business was being conducted from the farm and who was behind it. Not Chandler. He wouldn't have the money or the facilities to start what was obviously an organization. Somebody must have supplied the finance to buy the house and landing field, probably the whole farm property. Was it the uncle, so-called Dr. Hammal? That seemed more than likely. He wasn't British. He didn't look British. The name Hammal didn't sound British. There was the accent, too. It was not sufficiently pronounced to suggest his country of origin but he had obviously been in England for a long time. Chandler was merely employed by him, Bertie decided. With a chip on his shoulder through being thrown out of the R.A.F., and then refused a civil licence, he would fall in readily with any scheme, no matter how crooked.

Who else was in the house? There was the woman in the kitchen, presumably the cook. Whatever she was doing she must know what was going on. Who else? The farm-hand who had driven the cattle into the field. He would know about the flying that went on even if he took no part in it. That would make him one of the gang. There must, Bertie thought, be more people in it than that. What about mechanics to take care of the aircraft? Chandler, having been a fitter in the R.A.F, could probably manage routine jobs without one. He must have been a man of exceptional ability before he took to drink or he would not have been selected for flying training.

Again Bertie turned his attention to the room he was in. It had been prepared for someone, some expected guest. It was not Chandler's room or he would not have been put in it. Apparently it was not occupied at the moment but for whom had it been intended? It was no use trying to guess the answer to that. In the corridor he had noticed other doors like his own so there was no shortage of accommodation. It was a big house, and no doubt had originally been the residence of a wealthy farmer; but what sort of establishment was it now? From what he had seen it was fitted out more like a guest-house. Who were the guests?

So ran Bertie's thoughts. Bored with inaction he went to the window and looked again at the field. The cattle were still there, which he took to mean there would be no more flying that day. Still watching, he saw Chandler arrive at the garden gate from the direction of the barn. His hands were black and there was a smudge on his face. He entered the house. Bertie came to the conclusion that he had been working on the aircraft.

Satisfied there was nothing he could do for the time being, and having made up his mind to accept the proposition, he sat in the chair to await Chandler's return; and as he sat there he turned his attention to a slight sound he had heard before. It was a faint, intermittent tapping. With his head full of other matters, if he had thought about it at all he had taken it to be water dripping somewhere. He got up and went to the sink. Neither of the taps was leaking. He located the sound coming from lower down. He examined the pipe which ran along the floor close to the wall but could not see any water.

Standing there, puzzled, with a shock he suddenly realized there was something familiar in the succession of taps, which had now stopped. Was his imagination playing tricks or had they been the dots and dashes of the Morse Code? Why hadn't he noticed it before? Was someone, somewhere, tapping out a signal? He waited. Again came the taps, and this time there was no mistake. The message, one common enough, was the three dots and dashes, repeated, that spell a call for help, S-O-S.

Shaken, his brain racing, Bertie dropped on his knees and quickly discovered that the sinister appeal was being carried along the water pipe. Somebody, somewhere near, was tapping the same pipe that passed through his room. Who? Why? Was it possible there was another prisoner in the house? It seemed fantastic—and yet, why not? He was himself a prisoner. Taking a penny from his pocket he waited for another pause and then tapped, very gently, the “message received” signals. At the same time he was wondering, was this a trap? Deciding he would have to be careful what he said, because the pipe might well run all over the house, he asked the question: “Who are you?”

At once the answer came. “Name Welsh. Prisoner. Who are you?”

For a moment Bertie was stunned. Whatever answer he may have expected it was not this. In his own dilemma he had forgotten Taffy. Taffy! he thought wildly. Of course. It was so easy now he knew. He replied: “Name Lissie. Air pilot. Prisoner too.” He was, of course, delighted, and excited, to learn that Taffy was still alive.

Then began a dramatic conversation, although Bertie, still afraid of being overheard, actually said very little. It need not be recorded in detail. It all amounted to this. Taffy was in the next room. His window, like Bertie's, overlooked the landing ground. He had heard aircraft. He had seen the Auster with a dead prop make its emergency landing. Had watched the pilot come to the house with Chandler. Sounds had indicated he was in the next room. Not having seen the Auster before he had taken a chance by trying his luck with a signal. Bertie asked him if a proposition had been put to him. Taffy said yes, and he had turned it down.

At this juncture, hearing footsteps approaching along the corridor, Bertie sent a swift “message ends” and returned to his chair.

The door opened and Chandler came in. “Well?” he asked. “How do you feel about it? Have you made up your mind yet, one way or the other?” He

brought with him a faint aroma of whisky.

Bertie smiled wanly. "Of course. I'm not a fool, although as far as I can see I haven't much choice. I can use money as well as most people. Aside from that, a little excitement in a dull world wouldn't come amiss. But before we get down to brass tacks there are one or two questions I'd like to ask."

"As long as you don't want to know too much, go ahead," invited Chandler, closing the door and taking a seat on the bed. He allowed his jacket to fall open showing the gun, presumably to remind Bertie it was there, and discourage him from anything in the way of violence.

"If I say I'm in the party where do I live?" began Bertie.

"Here, of course."

"Does that mean you live here?"

"It does."

"But when I landed you told me you'd just dropped in to—"

"You wouldn't expect me to tell you on the spur of the moment what I've told you since?"

"No, I suppose not. But about living here. You realize I haven't any kit."

"Don't worry about that. We can fix you up with everything, pyjamas, small kit, the lot."

"You talk as if you knew I was coming."

"It happens we often have temporary guests so we've laid on a small stock of the necessary gear in case they arrive without any."

Who, Bertie wondered, were the guests? But he didn't ask. "Where do I have my meals?"

"With us, if you'll promise not to do anything silly."

"Do I have to spend the time I'm not flying locked in this room?"

"I hope that will only be temporary. It depends on yourself."

"When do I make my first trip?"

"Tomorrow night."

"In the Cub?"

"No. The Auster."

"But the Auster's out of action."

"Not now. I've put the trouble right."

"What was it?"

"Only a loose junction in the oil lead."

"That means she must have lost plenty. She'll need more."

"I've filled her up. I can manage oil but not petrol. I've checked your tanks. You must have topped up at Lysett."

"I did. Will you be with me?"

"Of course. You'll need me to show you the way and vouch for you at the other end."

"Am I right in thinking we shall be going abroad?"

"You are."

"Where?"

“France.”

“Where in France.”

“Does it matter?”

“It might. It’s a long run from the Channel to the Mediterranean. If we’re going to the extreme south we shall be cutting it fine for petrol. But maybe you’ve made arrangements to fill up at the other end.”

“No. But we should manage.”

“In still air, no doubt; but what happens if we run into a stiff head wind on the way home?”

“We shall have to take a chance on that. We shouldn’t have any trouble. I’ve done the trip before so I know every inch of the ground. I have a compass course set. Adjustments for drift, should they be necessary, can be made in the air.”

“Are we taking something out of the country or going to fetch something?”

“Both.” Chandler smiled. “It’s a two-way service. That doubles the profits. Anything else?”

“Do you carry any papers, genuine or otherwise, in case of trouble?”

“Not me. I’ve no time for red tape. If I want to go somewhere, I go. Who’s to stop me?”

“I’d better know the drill. What do you do if you’re challenged?”

“I take no notice of ground signals.”

“What if a fighter is sent up to force you down?”

“Force me down! Ha! Don’t make me laugh. I’d like to see anyone trying to catch me.”

“How long is this business of yours likely to go on? I don’t want to spend the rest of my life here.”

“Naturally. Neither do I. It depends on how well things go. But never mind about that. I came up to tell you supper’s ready if you feel like coming down. Don’t ask questions at the table. My uncle won’t answer them anyway. You may find him a bit touchy but it means nothing. He’s like that.”

“I imagine he isn’t really your uncle.”

Chandler smiled again. “Of course he isn’t. I created him for your benefit when you landed, to make an excuse for being in the field. But let’s go down.”

Bertie followed his host to the dining-room. Dr. Hammal was already there, seated at the head of the table. Next to him was the woman who had been in the kitchen. The lights were on and the table was well dressed for a cold meal, with two bottles of wine conspicuous. Caviare in bowls of crushed ice had already been served. A young man who looked like a Chinese brought in a napkin-covered plate of toast.

“Make yourself at home,” said Chandler, as they took their places. “As you see, we don’t do ourselves badly.”

Bertie agreed mentally.

There is no need to describe the meal in detail. It was excellent, but in the absence of conversation it was a dull affair. Chandler, Bertie noticed, took

whisky instead of wine, and would have had more had not Hammal raised his eyebrows. When it was over Bertie was returned to his room and again locked in. Chandler's last words were: "Have a good night. You may not get much sleep tomorrow night."

Bertie, powerless to do anything, decided to accept the advice. He found the kit Chandler had promised, pyjamas on the bed and toilet things in place. He was tempted to make a signal to Taffy via the water pipe, but decided against it as being too dangerous. Having nothing really to say it seemed an unjustifiable risk. With so much to think about it was some time before he got off to sleep, but on the whole he had a fair night.

Morning brought another fine day. Bertie got up and dressed, and had a look at the field. The cattle were still there. Nothing else. At eight o'clock Chandler appeared and took him down to breakfast. As at supper there was an uncomfortable atmosphere and little was said. Afterwards he went out with Chandler to the barn where they looked over the aircraft and ran up the Auster's engine to check it. The conversation was entirely technical.

As they walked back to the house Bertie said: "Look here, I don't want to press you, but don't you think it's about time you told me exactly where we're going tonight? I ought to be in a position to keep in touch with things—if you see what I mean."

Chandler hesitated. "I suppose you might as well know now. The objective is Marseilles, or just north of it. I have an appointment there with someone."

"Thanks," acknowledged Bertie. "As long as I know what I'm doing."

"Do you know that district?"

"I have flown over it," admitted Bertie carelessly.

After lunch, another desultory meal, he returned to his room to wait for nightfall. He was not exactly worried, but he was far from happy. To his certain knowledge Chandler had had six stiff whiskies, and he would have preferred to fly with a sober companion. That is not to say Chandler was drunk; but he was in the awkward mood of a man who has had enough alcohol but not sufficient to satisfy him. Again Bertie thought of contacting Taffy, if he was still in the next room, but refrained for the same reason as before.

Some time later the sound of an approaching aircraft took him quickly to the window and he was thrilled to see an Auster pass just beyond the bottom end of the field. It was flying low and on a dead straight course. It was too far away for him to make out the registration letters but he thought it might be Biggles looking for him—as in fact it was. It passed on out of sight. Soon afterwards he saw it coming back, no longer on a straight course but weaving from side to side. He felt almost sure Biggles was at the controls but was of course unable to confirm it. Apparently the chalk mark had not been noticed for it held on its way and presently disappeared. He was disappointed but not surprised. With cattle grazing it was unlikely that the field would be given a second glance.

Some time later he saw the beasts being herded out, and knew the reason. This was in preparation for the night's work. He stayed at the window until dusk dimmed the scene but saw nothing else of interest.

As night closed in Chandler appeared at the door. "Ready?" he queried. "We're all set."

A quick meal—during which Chandler drank two more whiskies, this time by themselves—and Chandler got up. With their flying caps in their hands they made their way through the darkness to the barn, Chandler leading, torch in hand. Doctor Hammal was there, as he said, to give them a hand and see them off. Bertie noticed him hand a small wash-leather bag to Chandler who put it in his pocket.

"Are you going to do the flying?" he asked Chandler.

"No. You can take her. I'll give you the course when we're clear."

"What about navigation lights?"

"We shan't need any. No need to tell the world what we're doing."

Nothing more was said. The Auster was pulled into the open, Doctor Hammal helping. The two pilots took their places. In dead still air the engine was started and Bertie taxied into position facing the longest run the field could offer. He eased the throttle open. The Auster moved forward soon to race at increasing speed. Vibration stopped as the wheels left the ground and the aircraft was on its way.



The two pilots took their places.

“Keep climbing,” ordered Chandler. “I like to get somewhere near the ceiling and then glide across the coast without making a song about it. The height I lose doing that I take back over the Channel.”

The Auster bored into the night sky, climbing in widening circles. Bertie

settled in his seat and plugged in the radio. Chandler, a hand resting on the dual control column, did the same. "This is better than flying to orders," he remarked, with a chuckle.

Bertie didn't answer. He viewed the immediate future without any serious anxiety. As Chandler had said, it was too easy; but he might have felt less sanguine had he known about the message Biggles had decided to send to France.

CHAPTER VIII

BIGGLES UNDERSTANDS

AFTER Ginger had gone to find a telephone Biggles sat still for some time turning over in his mind the situation as it now appeared. He had little doubt that the pilot of the Auster which had just taken off was Chandler. If not Chandler then another pilot working with him, which came to the same thing. There was no reason why more than one pilot should not be engaged in the criminal business that was obviously going on.

The most puzzling factor was the chalk mark in the field. It must have been dropped there by Bertie. That a bag of French chalk should have been dropped by anyone else would be stretching coincidence beyond the limits of credulity. It followed, therefore, that Chandler had landed in the field, and this was supported by the fact that a machine had just taken off. The cattle in the field could be ignored. They could be moved in and out as required. If this reasoning was correct it ended in the mystery of Bertie's disappearance. What had he done after dropping the chalk? Where had he gone? Where was he now? Where was his machine? Was it his Auster that had just taken off? If it was, how had Chandler got hold of it? By force? That could only have happened had Bertie disobeyed orders and landed in the same field as the man he was following; and this he could not believe.

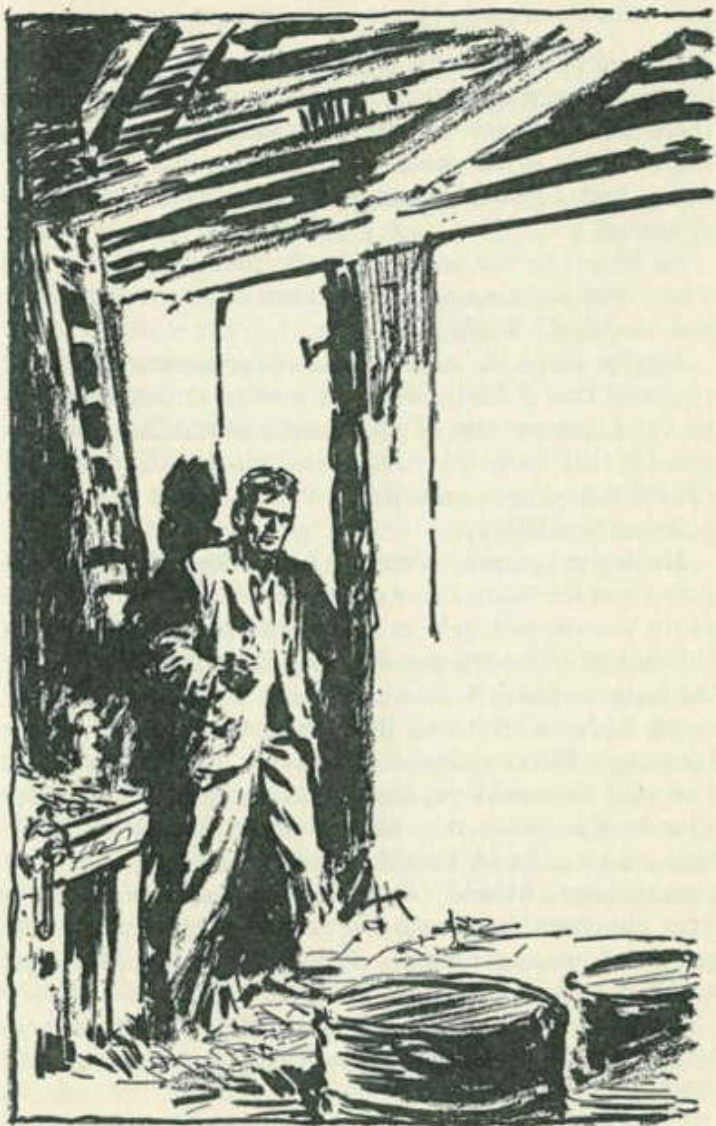
It may seem strange that Biggles never guessed the truth, which was that Bertie had been forced to land with engine trouble. But this is something which with modern aircraft rarely happens. Even if the possibility had entered Biggles' mind, which it did not, it is unlikely that he would have given it serious consideration for the simple reason that it would appear preposterous that Bertie should choose to come down in the same field as the man he was after. Yet what was the answer?

Biggles, bogged down in the question, came to the conclusion that a factor about which he knew nothing was somehow involved. One thing, however, was clear. If Bertie was anywhere near it could only be in the house, or in one of the adjacent outbuildings. That he had not reported could only mean that he was unable to do so. That being so it followed that, if he was still alive, he was being held by force. If this line of reasoning was correct, pondered Biggles, it became more and more likely that the Auster which had just taken off was his. He resolved to have a look inside the barn to see if the answer was to be found there.

All had been quiet for some time. Lights were showing at some of the windows of the house; but that could wait. First, the barn. He walked slowly towards it. He found the front open. That is to say, there were no doors, the main purpose of the structure being only to provide a covering for farm vehicles or a crop such as hay. In fact, trusses of hay lay piled on each side of

the open entrance as if they had been used to conceal the interior from the inquisitive eyes of anyone who happened to pass by, but had been removed to allow the Auster to be brought out.

Already the unmistakable smell of aircraft told him all he needed to know. The barn was being used as a hangar. There was no light inside, no sound, so after a short pause he went on. Having entered he risked flicking on his cigarette lighter for a moment, shielding the tiny flame with a hand to prevent it from being seen from the house should anyone there happen to be looking in his direction. It was enough. There stood a Cub, beyond any doubt the missing aircraft. At the rear end of the barn there was a bench strewn with tools such as an aero engine fitter would need. On the floor stood some oil drums and a few odds and ends. There was nothing else of interest.



On the floor stood some oil drums and a few odds and ends.

So here was the stolen aircraft, thought Biggles. But where was the man who had taken it up on the day it had vanished? Taffy Welsh.

Biggles fingered his chin in concentration. He had reasoned that if Bertie were there at all it could only be in the house or one of its several outbuildings. Was it possible that Taffy was in the same place? Assuming that

Chandler had not murdered them this began to look like a strong possibility.

Having no reason to remain in the barn Biggles went out to find the moon above the horizon shining through one of the numerous breaks in banks of cumulus cloud which still drifted across the sky. He made his way to the back of the barn to put it between him and the house, squatted down under a bush and lit a cigarette, prepared to wait for Ginger before doing anything else. That was what he had said he would do, and although rather than waste time he was tempted to have a closer look at the house he would not break his rule of always sticking to a fixed arrangement. Should Ginger return and not find him near the barn he would not know what to do. Once separated, in the darkness it might be difficult to get together again.

It was nearly two hours before a low whistle near at hand announced Ginger's return. Biggles answered and they were soon together.

"You've been a long time," complained Biggles.

"I was some time finding a phone box, and getting through to Paris was a slow business."

"Did you speak to Marcel himself?"

"Yes, eventually. The office had to fetch him. That's what took the time."

"What did he say?"

"Not much. He said to thank you for the tip and we could leave it to him. He'd let us know if anything happened."

"Good enough. Where did you leave the car?"

"At the same place. What's been going on here?"

"Nothing since you went. I've had a look in the barn. The missing Cub is there."

"So we still don't know if the Auster we saw take off was Bertie's."

"Not for certain, but I think it must have been. If it was Bertie's machine, why it came here, and how Chandler got hold of it, beats me. I've nearly knocked my pan out trying to make sense of it."

"What's the next move?"

"All we can do is have a closer look at the house."

"We're not likely to learn much from the outside."

"We're hardly in a position to go inside. It would mean either knocking on the door or breaking in. What reason could we give for calling at this hour? It's half past ten. We couldn't ask questions without sending the whole business sky high and possibly starting something too big for us to handle. We don't know who's in that house. There might be a gang of toughs. To ask if Bertie was there, which is what we really want to know, would be a waste of time. We've no search warrant. As for breaking in—no, we haven't enough evidence to go as far as that. That sort of thing might be all right on television, but if it did turn out we were on the wrong tack we'd probably find ourselves sacked. I'm not prepared to risk going off at half cock. Apart from anything else I want to know what sort of racket Chandler is running. We've got to kill it, not only here but the other end of the organization. There must be one

somewhere.”

“What have we to gain by delay? I’m thinking of Bertie.”

“If he’s come to no harm so far a few more hours shouldn’t make any difference. Don’t worry. I’m not leaving here till I get to the bottom of this. Sooner or later Chandler will come back and that will be our chance to see what it’s all about.”

“If he’s gone to the South of France it’ll be later rather than sooner.”

“We don’t know that he’s gone to the South of France.”

“No; but if he has I don’t see how he could get back here much before dawn. If he lands at the other end of his run, as I imagine he will, it’ll take him all his time to get back before daylight. I’ll tell you something else. If that was Bertie’s Auster, if the tanks weren’t topped up after Bertie had flown to Lysett it wouldn’t get to the South of France and back. My mental arithmetic isn’t all that bright, but—”

“Chandler isn’t a fool. He wouldn’t start on a trip without enough petrol. He might have refuelling arrangements at his destination. But this is all guesswork. I’m satisfied he’ll come back here, and when he does I shall be about. We shall hear him coming. I’m not expecting to learn much, if anything, at the house, but as we have nothing else to do we might as well give it the once over. There’s no hurry. It might be as well to wait a bit, to give everyone a chance to get to bed and asleep. Afterwards we’ll come back here and take it in turns to have a spot of shut-eye while we’re waiting for the Auster.”

They waited for nearly an hour; then, as the moon was behind a cloud they moved off along the top end of the field towards the house, now in darkness. Even though the moon was hidden there was still sufficient light for them to see what they were doing. Reaching the wicket gate, the overgrown vegetable garden told them they were approaching the house from the rear. They listened for a while and then went on. All was silent. They had nearly reached the back door when the moon, riding clear of the cloud to flood the place with light, sent them quickly to the nearest cover, a little group of soft-fruit bushes — gooseberries, Ginger discovered when he encountered some thorns. Again they waited for any indications that they had been seen. None came.

“They can’t suspect anything so I don’t imagine they keep a day and night watch,” Biggles whispered. “We should be fairly safe. Let’s have a look round the front. When we’ve done that we’ll come back and prowl round the outbuildings.”

They went round the end of the house to the front, where Biggles was a little disturbed to find he had been mistaken in supposing the occupants had gone to bed. A light showed through the fanlight over the front door. This brought them to a halt. A quick survey revealed a gravelled area surrounded by evergreen shrubs and trees through which a drive ran to some distant road. There was nothing remarkable about it. It was what might have been expected.

Standing in the deep shadow of the shrubs Biggles said softly: "I don't like that light. Obviously someone is still up. Why, I wonder? It's pretty late."

Then, as they stood there, thinking about this and uncertain what to do next, the explanation was forthcoming. It came with a purr of a car and headlights flashing through the trees.

"Look out, here's a car," said Biggles tersely, backing as far into the bushes as he could get and screening his face with twigs.

They were only just in time. Seconds later a car, a big limousine, swept into the open area to pull up by the door. It gave a short *toot-toot* presumably to announce its arrival. A uniformed chauffeur sprang out and opened the nearside rear door. A stockily built man, carrying an attaché case, stepped out. By this time the front door of the house had been thrown open and a dark figure stood silhouetted against the light. The new arrival joined him. A few words were spoken. They went in. The door was shut. The chauffeur resumed his seat and the car purred softly to a position hard under the trees facing the drive. The chauffeur got out, locked the doors, and disappeared round the far end of the house. Silence returned. The light over the door went out. A light appeared in one of the upstairs windows.

"What was all that about?" breathed Ginger.

"I don't know, but whoever that man was I'd say he intends to stay the night," returned Biggles. "Had he been going to stay only a short time the chauffeur wouldn't have bothered to move the car and there would have been no reason to lock it. Creep round and get its number. There's no need for us both to go."

Ginger, never leaving the deep shadow of the hedge went to the car and returned. "It's a Daimler," he reported. "I've got its number." He wrote it in his notebook. "It also carries a C.D. plate."¹

"The devil it does. Who on earth could that be?"

"Are you going to stay here?"

Biggles considered the question. "No, I can't see much point in it. That chap and his driver are here for the night and I don't feel like standing here till daylight. We shan't learn anything more here. Let's go back to the barn and get some rest. We shall then be in position, without having to move about, to see the Auster when it comes back."

"If it comes back."

"What do you mean?" asked Biggles, as they made their way back to the rear of the house.

"A horrible thought has just struck me. You remember what Marcel said he would do if there was any more of this irregular night flying by machines that refuse to answer signals. He said something to the effect that it might be necessary to force the machine to land."

"By thunder! You're right. I'd forgotten that. Oh well, Chandler will have to take his luck. He's been asking for trouble long enough."

They were passing along the back of the house in misty moonlight, on their

way back to the barn, when a sharp sound, the sort of sound a man makes when he tries to hiss to attract attention, coming from somewhere near at hand sent them darting for the cover of the gooseberry bushes. Then, as they looked about them in a state of acute alarm a voice said urgently: "Wait. Don't run away."

Said Biggles, failing to locate the voice: "Where are you?"

"Up here. Window on the first floor."

Looking up Ginger could just make out a pale object, which he took to be a human face, against the darkness of the room behind.

"I don't care if you're burglars—I must talk to you," went on the voice.

"What about?" asked Biggles. He knew from the voice that the speaker was not Bertie.

"I'm locked in. Will you get me out, or tell the police I'm here?"

"Who are you?"

"You won't know me but the name's Welsh."

Understanding hit Biggles like a thunderbolt. "Taffy Welsh?"

"That's right. I'm an air pilot and—"

"We know all about it. We've been looking for you. But we can't stand talking here. Someone has just arrived—"

"I heard the car hoot. That's why I came to the window."

"What's stopping you from getting out?"

"The door's locked and the window's barred."

"How are the bars fixed?"

"Screwed across from the outside. Don't go away. It should be safe to talk here. No one's likely to go out again tonight."

"Do you know if these people have a ladder?"

"I've never seen one."

"Just a minute." Biggles turned to Ginger. "Have a quick look round. There should be a ladder somewhere at a place like this. Try the outbuildings. There'll be a screwdriver with the tools in the barn but it'll be no use if we can't find a ladder to get up to the window. Careful how you go."

"If there is one I'll find it." Ginger hurried off.

"Hold on. We're trying to find a ladder," Biggles told Taffy. "Do you know who these people are?"

"I haven't a clue. All I know is they're a bunch of crooks. What are you doing here?"

"We were looking for you. I'm Bigglesworth of the Air Police. I know all about you disappearing from Kingsmead in a Cub, with a passenger. Lorrimore called us in."

"I took up a swine named Litton."

"He's an ex-R.A.F. pilot. Real name Chandler. How did he get you?"

"He pushed a gun into the back of my neck and made me land here. He lives here. He's using my Cub—"

"I know."

"Now he's pinched an Auster."

"How did you know that?"

"I saw it happen. Yesterday, hearing flying and looking out of the window, I saw it land in the field, nearly on top of the Cub. The pilot nearly had it. Missed the trees by inches. His engine was smoking like stink so he had to get down where he could."

Biggles drew a deep breath of understanding as Bertie's behaviour was explained. "Then what happened?"

"Chandler, as you call him, brought the Auster pilot to the house. A little later I saw the Auster pulled up to the barn where they keep my Cub. Then some cattle were put in the field."

"Do you know what happened to the Auster pilot after he came to the house?"

"Yes. He was put in the room next to mine."

"How do you know?"

"I heard someone there and made contact by tapping Morse on the water pipe. He's a chap named Lissie."

"Is he there now?"

"No. He's gone."

"Gone where?"

"God knows. He's a rat, anyhow, look you."

"Why a rat?" asked Biggles, startled.

"I saw him go out with Chandler some time ago. Then the Auster took off. That can only mean that Lissie has agreed to work for the bunch of crooks who are running this show. They made the same offer to me. Money for nothing, Chandler said. A smuggling racket, I'd think."

"You refused?"

"I told 'em to go to hell."

"So they've kept you locked up ever since."

"That's it."

"How have they treated you?"

"They're starving me to death, hoping, I suppose, I'll come round to helping them."

"Lissie is one of my men," announced Biggles.

"I'm sorry—"

"Never mind. You say he went to the barn with Chandler?"

"Yes."

"Did Chandler come back?"

"No."

"You think he must have taken Lissie with him in the Auster?"

"Certain. Chandler wouldn't be likely to let Lissie go alone for fear he didn't come back."

It can be imagined how this piece of information shook Biggles. While he was thinking swiftly of what it might involve Ginger came back.

"I can't find a ladder anywhere," he reported lugubriously.

"Hold your hat," said Biggles grimly. "Bertie was in the Auster."

Ginger's eyes sauced. "Don't tell me..."

Looking up again at Taffy Biggles said: "Sorry, but we can't help you for the moment. There's no ladder, and no other way of getting up to you. But don't worry. We'll be back."

"What are you going to do?"

"Wait near the barn for the Auster to come back."

"Mnd how you go. Don't forget Chandler carries a gun. He wouldn't have got me here without one."

"I can believe that."

At this juncture the conversation was interrupted in no uncertain manner. The light came on in Taffy's room and a voice said harshly: "Who are you talking to? Come away from that window!"

As Taffy's shadow disappeared Biggles dropped lower into the bushes, pulling Ginger with him and covering his face. A different figure appeared against the light of the bedroom. For a few seconds it remained there. Then the window was shut with a bang. Faintly from inside the room came voices raised as if in argument.

Biggles took Ginger by the arm. "We'd better get out of this. They may search the grounds. There's a cloud coming up. Wait for it."

As the cloud cut off the moonlight they hastened to the field gate and then on to the barn. Reaching the place at the rear where they had waited Biggles said: "Now we have got something to think about."

"Are you telling me," replied Ginger tersely. "What I'm thinking about is Bertie in the Auster, and Marcel all steamed up to shoot it down. If that happens we shall feel responsible."

"One can't be right all the time," returned Biggles philosophically. "It's too late to do anything about it now. If Marseilles was the objective the Auster must be nearly there by this time; or it will be before we can get in touch with Marcel."

"So we just sit here and do nothing."

"We told Taffy we'd stick around. The Auster may not have gone to the South of France. That's only conjecture. It might return at any moment. But there's no reason why we should do nothing. Come to think of it there's one thing we might do."

"What's that?"

"See that the Cub stays on the ground in case Chandler has ideas of using it before we can knock this crooked set-up on the head. There's no need to damage a good aeroplane. I'll drain the tank. It won't get anywhere without petrol. You try to get some rest. We look like having a busy day tomorrow."

"If you're going into the barn I'd better come as far as the front to keep *cave*," offered Ginger. "You'd look silly if someone came across from the house and caught you in the act. If you say hay has been used to cover the

entrance we might bring some back here to make a more comfortable place to rest.”

“That’s an idea,” agreed Biggles.

They made a stealthy approach to the front of the barn. All remained quiet. What Biggles had to do did not take long. Taking a truss of hay between them they returned to their spot behind the hedge at the back of the barn and spread it about. This done Ginger turned up his jacket collar and settled down, leaving Biggles to keep watch.

Vigils are tiresome enough by day. They can make a night seem endless. Nothing happened. The house remained in darkness. No purr of an aero engine helped to relieve the boredom. Biggles gave Ginger until four o’clock, then roused him.

“Anything doing?” asked Ginger.

“Not a thing; but if the Auster has gone to the South of France it could hardly have got back yet. Still, as we don’t know for certain where it has gone it may show up at any time. If I drop off to sleep wake me as soon as it begins to get light.”

Biggles did not need Ginger to wake him. An autumnal chill in the air at dawn did that. He stretched and looked at his watch. “Six o’clock,” he observed. “I hope we haven’t sat here all night for nothing. The Auster should be back by now—if it’s coming at all. I can’t imagine Chandler flying in across the coast in broad daylight. Apart from that there’s the question of petrol. If the machine isn’t back here within the next half-hour it’s bound to be on the ground somewhere.”

“Chandler may have laid on refuelling arrangements at the far end of his run.”

“That could be the explanation,” agreed Biggles, wearily.

1 Diplomatic Corps (*Corps Diplomatique*) plate.

CHAPTER IX

TRAGIC NEWS

TIME dragged on. Seven o'clock came and still the Auster did not appear. Eight o'clock. The sun was now well up. Distant sounds told of people starting another day's work.

Biggles drew a deep breath. "That Auster isn't coming back today," he declared gloomily. "Something must have happened because I'm pretty sure it was expected back."

"Why so sure?"

"The cattle in the field."

Ginger, peering through the hedge, looked round. "I don't see any."

"That's what I mean. If we were right in supposing the cattle were being used as a blind, surely, if the people at the house knew the Auster wasn't coming back the beasts would now be in the field. As they haven't been turned in, it follows that the machine was, or still is, expected home. At least, that's how I see it."

Ginger nodded. "I take your point. So the Auster was expected back. It may still come. Well, what are we going to do? Sit here all day? I need food, if you don't."

"I don't know what to think, and that's a fact," confessed Biggles. "I have a feeling we've got off the beam somewhere. One thing I do know is, the Auster can't still be flying on the petrol it had in its tanks when it left here. If it didn't refuel somewhere it must be on the ground."

"If so we could sit here for a week. What are you going to do about it?"

"It needs thinking about. Perhaps we ought to give it a bit longer."

"Meanwhile Taffy must be wondering why he hasn't been rescued. We started by looking for him and his Cub. Now we know where they both are isn't it time we did something about it?"

"Such as?"

"Why not tackle the house?"

"We can't do that."

"Why not? We know for certain Taffy is there."

"They'd say he wasn't. We've no search warrant. If we tried to force an entrance we might bite off more than we could chew. Anything might happen, and at this stage I don't feel like carrying the responsibility on my own shoulders."

"We're police officers."

"Yes, and that sets a limit on what we can do. We're expected to enforce the law, not break it, which is what we would be doing if we broke in. I think I'll ring the Air Commodore and ask for instructions. Let him make the decision. Another hour or two shouldn't make any difference. You stay here

and keep an eye on things. I'll get back as soon as I can." Biggles got up.

"Okay, if that's how you feel about it."

"I shall go to Lysett and phone London from there. Grant must be wondering what the devil we're doing with his car all this time, anyway. See you later. Stay where you are, then I shall know where to find you." Biggles set off down the hedge.

He found the car as it had been left and made the best time to the aerodrome to find that Grant had just arrived having been picked up at home by one of the airfield employees.

"I'm sorry about your car but we ran into difficulties," he said apologetically. "We're up against something serious and I shall have to ask you to let me keep it for a little while. If you like you can hire a car and charge it to me."

"That's all right," answered Grant cheerfully.

"Any news here?"

"No. Did you find what you were looking for?"

"More or less."

"The Cub hasn't been back here for petrol."

"I know. We found it, and we've been keeping an eye on it. The Auster was in the same place, but it took off and might be anywhere now. We can't find Lissie, but we've reason to believe he was in the Auster when it went off. Don't ask me why. I haven't a clue. But I must get on to London if I may use your telephone."

"Go ahead."

Biggles put through a priority call to Scotland Yard and was soon talking to his chief who had just arrived in his office. The conversation that followed took some time, for the story he had to tell was a complicated one involving a number of factors. The missing Cub had been located in a field barn; its rightful pilot was a prisoner in a house near by; a Diplomatic Corps car had arrived at the house after dark; Bertie and his Auster were missing; it was thought he had gone off somewhere with Chandler, the man who had stolen the Cub; he had to describe the situation as it was when he had left it a little while ago. He had rung up for instructions as to how he should proceed. He had no authority to enter the house.

Naturally, the Air Commodore had a lot of questions to ask. The first was, had Biggles any positive information about what was going on in the house?

Biggles had to say no. At first he had thought Chandler, with confederates in the house, was engaged in a simple smuggling racket; but the presence of a C.D. car had made him suspect there was more to it than that. There might be a political angle. That was why he was asking for orders.

The Air Commodore wanted to know if Biggles had any idea of why the C.D. car had come to the house?

Biggles said that as the car had stayed the night the only reason he could think of was that it was there to meet someone off the Auster when it returned.

So far it had not returned. He thought it had been expected. (This meant explaining how cattle were being used, as he believed, to provide cover for the landing field.) All this took time.

“What do you propose?” asked the Air Commodore. Biggles answered that he thought the time had come to search the house to see what was going on. “What excuse have we for that?”

“Taffy Welsh is a prisoner there. It’s time we got him out.”

“And any people who may be in the house. What are you going to charge them with?”

“Abduction.”

“Nothing else?”

“We may find something.”

“I don’t like the word *may*. Suppose you fail to find Welsh? He may have been moved. Then where are you?”

Biggles saw the Air Commodore was right. It wouldn’t do to make a blunder. “The only alternative to raiding the house is to wait for Chandler to come back and see what he has brought with him,” he suggested.

The Air Commodore said it might be advisable to do that; but he would speak to the Commissioner and call him back.

“Don’t be too long, sir,” pleaded Biggles. “Ginger is watching the place alone and I’d like to get back to him as soon as possible. As things stand anything could happen.”

“I’ll be as quick as I can,” promised the Air Commodore. “Don’t go away.”

With that Biggles had to be content. He could see the thing from his chief’s point of view. They had little direct evidence to work on, apart from Taffy; and even if he was still there a reason might be found for it. There might be something more important than Taffy, and if they acted too soon they might never know the real purpose of the organization, which needed an aircraft to operate it.

To pass the time he had a wash and brush up, drank two cups of tea with some sandwiches provided by the club steward, and as an afterthought put a packet of sandwiches in his pocket for Ginger. After that he could only control his impatience as well as he could.

He had to wait half an hour before the call came through. The Air Commodore explained there had been some delay over the question of bringing in the local police. He didn’t want to upset them by going over their heads in their own district without any sort of explanation. The arrangements he had made suited Biggles well enough although they meant another delay. Already on their way in a chartered Viking were Inspector Gaskin and one of his men with a search warrant, this to be used only if circumstances justified it. With them was a security officer of the Special Branch. They would land at Lysett. Biggles would have to wait for them to show them the farm. They should be along in about an hour. What action they took would have to be left

to their initiative.

Biggles, now fretting with impatience, could only wait.

Rather more than an hour later the Viking came in. Biggles met the three officers in it. He knew the Security Officer slightly, a sergeant named Smith. All were in plain clothes.

“What’s all this about?” asked Gaskin. “I’ve been given a rough idea but I don’t know the details.”

Biggles explained the situation as quickly as he could.

“What do you want to do about it?”

“When I rang up the Air Commodore my idea was to get into that farm, without wasting any more time, to find out what’s going on.”

“Don’t you know?”

“Frankly, no. All I know is, the people inside are not there to raise chickens or milk cows or they wouldn’t have pinched an aeroplane. Two planes, in fact. At the moment they’re using one of my Austers, and if my information is correct this crook Chandler has got Bertie Lissie in it with him.”

“How did that happen?”

“You tell me,” answered Biggles helplessly.

“How many people are there in the house?”

“I don’t know that, either.”

“Well, what do you want us to do now we’re here?”

“For a start let’s get to the place and ask Ginger if anything has happened while I’ve been away. After that we can either wait for the Auster to come back and grab it, or raid the house.”

This was agreed, whereupon they got into Grant’s car and went to the scene of operations.

The first thing Biggles noticed as he led the party up the back of the hedge towards the barn was that the cattle were now in the landing field. They stood bunched under a tree in a corner. He remarked on this to Ginger when they joined him.

“When did this happen?”

“About twenty minutes ago.”

“Does that mean the Auster is back?” asked Biggles quickly.

“No. I take it to mean it isn’t coming back—anyhow, not today. But never mind about that. Hold your hat. Chandler’s here.”

“What?”

“Chandler’s in the house.”

Biggles stared. “How the devil did he get here?”

“I can only tell you he didn’t land here in the Auster. I’m beginning to wonder if he was ever in it.”

“That doesn’t make sense. Who else could it have been? Bertie wouldn’t be in it alone. If he had been he’d have come home. The Auster didn’t land at Lysett because I’ve just come from there.”

“Chandler may have come back here in a car,” resumed Ginger. “Soon

after you left I heard a car start up and go off down the drive. I took it to be the car we saw arrive last night. About half an hour later I heard another car. It came and apparently dropped someone because it left again immediately. That could have been Chandler, perhaps in a hired car, having made a forced landing somewhere.”

“You haven’t seen Bertie?”

“No. A few minutes ago Chandler appeared at the garden gate. He came half-way to the barn, then appeared to change his mind and went back. I haven’t seen him since.”

“You’re sure you weren’t mistaken?”

“Quite sure. At one time he was within twenty yards of me as I lay here watching through the hedge.”

“What can have happened to Bertie? And the Auster if it comes to that? I can’t believe Chandler would park it anywhere except here. And he wouldn’t leave Bertie knowing he’d make for the nearest phone box to inform the police about someone using his machine.”

“But Chandler wouldn’t know anything about Bertie being a cop or of his association with you,” put in Gaskin.

“Of course he wouldn’t—at any rate I sincerely hope not. But as Bertie wouldn’t be with him voluntarily he wouldn’t dare trust him out of his sight.”

“Could you swear Bertie was in the Auster when it took off?” asked Gaskin.

“No. Frankly, I couldn’t; but everything pointed to it. Taffy told us he saw Bertie and Chandler together going towards—”

“Huh!” broke in Gaskin. “It looks to me as if we shall find Bertie locked up in the house with Taffy Welsh. It’s my bet that Chandler went off by himself in the Auster. Why should he take Bertie with him?”

“No reason that I can think of.”

“All right. Let’s go along to the house and settle the matter without any more argument.”

“That seems to be the thing to do. Just a minute! What’s that?” Biggles looked down the hedge in the direction of the road on which the car had been left. From it came a succession of urgent toots on the horn.

“That’s some kid fiddling with Grant’s car,” opined Ginger.

“Sounds to me more like someone trying to attract attention,” said Gaskin. “We left the car well on the verge so that there shouldn’t be any bother about that.”

“I wonder could it by any chance be Grant with a message,” muttered Biggles. “If so he’d find the car but wouldn’t know where we were. He may have news that would settle the question for us, something that would affect the entire situation. We’d better find out. Ginger, slip along and see what goes on. We’ll stay here.”

Ginger went off at a run.

Biggles and the others waited. It was ten minutes before they saw him

coming back. He was walking slowly, head down. When he reached them it could be seen that his face was pale.

“What is it?” asked Biggles tersely, sensing something amiss.

“It was Grant. He’d had an urgent call from the Air Commodore and was trying to find us to pass on the message. He had to hoot.” Ginger spoke in a flat voice.

“Okay. So he found us. What was the message? Out with it.” Biggles’s eyes were on Ginger’s face.

“Our signal last night to Marcel Brissac seems to have started something,” replied Ginger grimly. “Everything was laid on to catch the Auster. It was picked up crossing the coast and tracked by radar right across France to just north of Marseilles, where it landed. It was nearly caught on the ground but got away. It was ordered down and warned that force would be used to bring it down if it refused to land. It took no notice. Guns opened up. It must have been hit. It crashed in Normandy not far short of the Channel coast.”

“How did the chief know about this?”

“He got it over the phone from Paris.”

“Who was in the machine?” Biggles spoke slowly.

“No one was in it. A man in a flying cap was found lying on the ground beside it.”

“Hurt?”

“Dead. He’d been shot through the heart.”

“What was—the name of—this man?”

“That isn’t known yet. The farmer who saw the crash told the local police. They phoned their headquarters and they got on to Paris. That’s as much as is known at present, except that the machine carries British registration. Police are on their way from Paris to investigate. That’s all. The dead man can’t be Chandler because we know he’s back here. That leaves only—”

“Bertie. We might as well face it.”

“Who else could it be?”

Biggles moistened his lips. “So that’s why Chandler came back alone. The Auster was shot down. My fault. One can be a bit too clever. Chandler got away with it. He must have chartered a plane or crossed by boat and came on here by car—no doubt the second car you heard this morning.”

Ginger nodded and turned away, apparently unable to trust himself to say any more. Silence fell.

Biggles lit a cigarette with a hand that was not quite steady.

A minute passed. Then Gaskin said: “Well, what next?”

Biggles answered. “I think it’s time I had a word with Mr. Chandler,” he said quietly.

“Then let’s get on with it,” agreed Gaskin.

CHAPTER X

WHAT HAPPENED TO BERTIE

AFTER taking off Bertie continued to keep the Auster climbing until Chandler said they were high enough, whereupon he swung round towards the English Channel, the sombre face of which, dotted with widely-spaced lights of shipping, had for some time been in view. Chandler gave him the compass course, a little east of south, and he put the aircraft on it.

“Cut the engine and glide as flat as you can for the next five minutes,” ordered Chandler, a few moments later.

Bertie obliged. “Don’t you feel a bit nervous, putting yourself in the hands of a pilot you don’t know?” he asked. “I might still be doing training.”

“I’m not a fool,” replied Chandler. “If you could bring this machine into my field the way you did, with a dead prop and your engine threatening to go up in flames, that’s good enough for me. Anyone but an old hand might have lost his head and panicked. You must have been flying for quite some time.”

“Long enough,” returned Bertie, vaguely. Changing the subject he inquired: “What happens if we’re challenged?”

“Nothing. Take no notice. Nobody on the ground dare do anything to stop us. These twits who call themselves air police can’t do a thing about it.”

“How can you be sure of that?”

“It stands to reason. I’m told they don’t even carry guns.”

“Who told you?”

“It’s common knowledge. To most people they’re a joke.”

Bertie did not pursue the subject.

After they had crossed the coastline, without being questioned, Chandler remarked: “There you are. What did I tell you? They’re half-asleep, if not quite.”

In the comparative quiet of the idling engine Bertie asked, without showing too much interest and without expecting an answer: “What was in the bag the Doctor gave you?”

“Diamonds,” answered Chandler—surprisingly, Bertie thought.

He whistled softly. “That little lot must be worth a packet.”

“In the ordinary market not as much as you might imagine. They’re commercial diamonds, not gem stones. Still, they’re worth a fair penny.”

“Why not real sparklers, while you’re at it?”

“Commercials are in more demand where these are going. As you know, or you should know, they’re indispensable for fine engineering work. The Western powers have agreed not to supply any to Iron Curtain countries.”

“Which I take to mean these will find their way to Russia,” said Bertie, tight-lipped.

“Take it how you like. Personally I couldn’t care less. I’m out to make

money the easy way and I don't care where it comes from."

Bertie said no more. His opinion of Chandler dropped even lower.

He held on his course towards the lights that lined the northern coast of France.

"Okay. You can take her back to ten thousand and cut again when I tell you," ordered Chandler, as they neared mid-Channel.

Bertie did so, and the Auster glided into French air between Le Havre and Bayeau. Apparently the French coastal defences were far from being asleep, for the Auster was now being ordered persistently to identify itself.

"Take no notice," said Chandler, casually.

"Aren't you taking a chance?"

"Forget it."

A searchlight stabbed the sky, groping for them.

"Hm," grunted Chandler. "They're not usually as active as this. Don't let 'em worry you. Keep clear of that damned beam."

"There's cloud ahead. We may be running into traffic."

"So what?"

"If we're spotted by the pilot of a big liner with a hundred passengers aboard he'll scream his head off."

"Let him. Ground control will warn him we're about."

"It won't be funny for the passengers if he has to make a sharp turn off course."

"What's the matter with you?" growled Chandler. "Scared? Quit belly-aching and get on with the job. Keep your eyes open. Nothing will happen. The people down below will soon get tired of trying to make us talk."

"So they may, but that doesn't mean they won't track us with radar."

"We'll get under it when we get to the Rhône Valley. That'll queer their pitch."

Bertie flew on, a glow in the sky far to the east marking the position of Paris. Later, nearer, appeared the lights of Orleans. There were no more signals. Actually, remembering what Chandler had said about flying low down the Rhône Valley, he was taking more interest in the weather conditions, although so far visibility had been good. He hoped it would remain so, for he knew, and trusted that his companion also knew, that the river, anyhow as far as Avignon, is flanked on both sides by high ground, wherefore to get off course in bad visibility might, for all Chandler's alcoholic confidence, end in disaster. In the event, however, he need not have worried.

It was a long flight, which took the Auster across the heart of France, so Bertie had plenty of time to think. They would, presumably land somewhere on the Plaine de la Crau. He was not happy about this, either. There was certainly plenty of room to get down and no doubt Chandler had taken into account the proximity of Marignane, the big airport for Marseilles. Close by were military aircraft establishments, both land and marine. These would certainly have the latest aircraft detecting devices. He had an idea there was

an aerodrome on the plain itself, although he couldn't remember whether it was a service squadron or a flying training school. He wondered if Chandler was aware of this, and if he was not, should he warn him? He decided to say nothing. Chandler might ask how he knew so much about it.

What he did say was: "How many times have you done this trip?"

"Only twice so far."

"I imagine you've studied the map for danger spots?"

"What do you take me for? I didn't plan the operation, anyway. The people who did would have put me wise about anything I should know."

With that Bertie had to be content. He dare not press the point.

The lights of the big city of Lyons, an unmistakable landmark to the east, were passed, and soon afterwards they struck the broad, silver ribbon of the Rhone. Here Chandler said they could begin slowly to lose height. The sky was now a hundred per cent clear, and the ground could be seen plainly, with the great river, and the main railway line to the south, which is never far from it, outstanding. It was no longer necessary to rely on the compass. All they had to do now, Chandler said, was follow the railway, which ran right across the Plaine de la Crau, their objective.

Orange, Avignon, Tarascon and Arles, were passed in turn, the Auster losing height all the way, and presently the broad plain, rolled flat by glaciers in ages past, lay before them, pale in the moonlight.

"All right. I'll take over now," said Chandler. "I know the spot where we touch down."

Bertie took his hands off the control column. This suited him, for he could now devote his entire attention to the ground, and so, he hoped, memorize any features near the rendezvous for future reference. Only a few well scattered lights showed, and most of these were car headlights on the main road which south of Arles runs due east across the plain to Salon, twenty-odd miles distant. Bertie's questing eyes picked up a stationary light, almost in the centre of the plain, so bright that he suspected it was a car lamp upturned. From time to time, significantly, it blinked in a manner that suggested a signal. He could see nothing near it. It must, he thought, be a vehicle of some sort, although as far as he could make out it was some distance from the road. Perhaps that was not surprising. On the hard level surface of the plain there was no reason why a man who knew the ground should stay on the road.

"So this is it," he thought.

It was soon evident that he was right. Chandler did two circuits round the light to slip off his little remaining altitude and then made a professional landing which ended within thirty yards of a big, powerful-looking saloon car which now took shape. The only light it carried, the one that had been turned up, went out. As the two pilots stepped down, their shoes crunching on a surface of sandy gravel, three figures left the car and walked briskly towards them.

"There you are; what did I tell you?" boasted Chandler, with a

condescending sneer. "No bother at all. It's money for old rope." He went on, curtly: "You'd better stay here. There's no need for you to say anything." He took a quick drink from a pocket flask and walked forward to meet his associates.

Bertie leaned against the near-side door, which had been left open, to watch the proceedings. What would Biggles think of this sinister conspiracy, he wondered. The air police, and Customs officers all over Europe, knew this sort of thing went on, but as Chandler had said, there was little they could do to prevent it. Biggles had more than once admitted this to the higher authorities, and explained why.

Bertie saw Chandler hand over the bag of diamonds and receive something in return. They went into a huddle and there was some conversation, but it was carried on in voices too low for Bertie to overhear. Presently they all walked nearer to the aircraft. Chandler came closer, and said to Bertie: "We're taking a passenger back with us."

To which Bertie replied: "In that case, if I may be allowed to make a suggestion, the sooner he's aboard the better."

"Why? Are you in a hurry?"

"Not particularly; but your friends may be, before long."

"What do you mean?"

"I've been watching two cars on the road—"

"The road's nearly a mile from here."

"I saw two cars coming along, one close behind the other, at a devil of a lick. For no reason that I could see they came to a sudden stop and all lights were switched off."

"What about it?"

"I have an idea, from the angle of the lights before they were switched off, that those cars left the road at a tangent to face this way."

"Oh, shut up. You'll give me the jitters if you go on like this, imagining things," growled Chandler, and turning about rejoined his companions.

Then it happened. The beam of a searchlight, held at a low angle, stabbed the moonlight and began sweeping the plain. So great was the shock that for some seconds nobody moved. By the time they had recovered and had started to move the light had reached them. It stopped, the glare blazing into their faces, blinding them. The result was panic. The tightly-grouped party split apart like a bursting bomb. Two men rushed to their car. Chandler and another man dashed to the Auster.

Bertie was ready. He had already pulled down the back of his seat, as was necessary to give access to the rear seats. The passenger was bundled in. "Get going," yelled Chandler, as he got in, using the offside door. Doors were slammed. The engine sprang to life. The Auster began to move, faster—faster. As the tail lifted a line of tracer shells flashed under it. More came as the aircraft became airborne, just in time, for the shots were higher, but still below. With the throttle wide open Bertie zoomed in a steep climbing turn,

thankful that the engine was still warm. He swung round, dived and zoomed again. The searchlight, which had at first held them, now lost them, but continued to grope for them. For a minute or two Bertie twisted and turned like a startled woodcock; then, as the beam dropped to sweep the ground, apparently seeking the car, he climbed away east for a while before heading north.

"Nice work," congratulated Chandler. "Anyone would think you'd done this sort of thing before."

"I seem to remember you saying this was easy money," said Bertie calmly.

"All right—all right. There's no need to get cocky about it. How could I know this was going to happen? It has never happened before."

"It was pretty certain to happen sometime if you keep flying the same course. This time they were waiting for you. It's a mistake to suppose everyone except yourself is a fool."

"Quit cackling. We're clear. That's all that matters."

"Not entirely."

"Now what?"

"If you'll plug in you'll hear we're being told to come down—or else."

"Or else what?"

"The lad speaking doesn't say."

Chandler plugged in. "What's he gabbling about?"

"Can't you speak French?"

"No. Why the hell should I?"

"Pity. If you could you'd hear him telling us to land or take the consequences."

"We'll take the consequences. I'm not landing. He's bluffing."

"Could be. Are we going home?"

"Of course. Where else do you think. Keep straight on up the Rhône."

"You realize that's exactly what they'll expect us to do. From the speed with which those cars arrived on the Plain we must have been tracked right across France. They'll guess we'll try to get home the same way."

"Rot. How can they know where we came from?"

"They picked us up crossing the coast—remember?"

"Why do you always go out of your way to look for snags?"

"In order to keep clear of 'em and live a bit longer."

"Make a bee-line for home. Let them do what the hell they like, they can't stop us. I doubt if they'll try." A long pause and Chandler went on: "You know, there's something queer about this. I've never run into anything like it before. They were ready for us. Anyone would think they'd been tipped off."

"Perhaps they were."

"By whom?"

"Don't ask me. I wouldn't know. You should be better able to answer that question."

"Do you know anything about it?" Chandler looked at Bertie suspiciously.

“Don’t be ridiculous. Would I be in this aircraft if I did? I didn’t even know where we were going until we were airborne, when you told me.”

“That’s right enough,” conceded Chandler. “Still, I can’t help feeling France was alerted.”

“Well, it wasn’t by me,” declared Bertie, truthfully. “Do you still want to head straight for home?”

“That’s what I said.”

“Take a look ahead.”

One by one searchlights sprang up to cut wedges in the sky.

“Damn them,” muttered Chandler. “If we try to get round ‘em we may run out of petrol.”

Hardly had the words left his lips when a flash and a loud report, uncomfortably close, came together. Something struck the Auster with a smack. The machine bumped as if pushed up from below.

“For a sighting shot that was pretty good,” observed Bertie.

White lines of shells streamed up from several points.

“Here, let me have her,” snarled Chandler.

“If you think you can handle her better than I can, go ahead,” invited Bertie, sitting back and taking his hands off the control column.

After a few minutes he was prepared to admit that Chandler was a first-class aerobatic pilot. He did everything possible to confuse the gunners, throwing the machine all over the sky and never flying straight for a moment.

“I hope I’m not making you sick,” said Chandler once, grimly, as he spun on a wing tip.

“Not me, but I fancy our passenger is taking a dim view of it,” returned Bertie, who had just looked behind to see how the man was faring. “He’s all of a heap on the floor.”

“Best place for him.”

Chandler continued to take evasive action until eventually the shooting stopped and one by one the searchlights were doused. “That’s better,” he said, flying a straight course, heading north, climbing to recover altitude he had lost in his aerobatics.

“They haven’t knocked a hole in a tank, anyhow,” said Bertie, his eyes running over the instrument panel. “That’s what I was afraid of. We were hit several times. If this is to be a regular procedure I shall think we earn our money.”

“It won’t happen again,” swore Chandler. “I’ll work out a new route, even if it’s longer and means laying on extra petrol at the other end. I have to land, anyway, so it shouldn’t be difficult to arrange that. We should be all right now.”

“As long as they don’t send fighters up to intercept.”

“You are a cheerful Jonah, I must say,” grumbled Chandler. “Think of something else.”

“I just thought it might be a good thing to keep our eyes skinned.”

The Auster continued to head for the English Channel, kicking the air behind it at maximum speed.

Bertie looked round with increasing frequency at the man in the back seats. He was lying across them in a crumpled heap. He did not move, or attempt to sit up.

“How is he?” asked Chandler. “Sick as a dog, I suppose. Made a nice mess in the cabin I imagine. Still, it couldn’t be helped.”

“I don’t like the look of him.”

“What do you mean?”

“If he’d only been sick he should be sitting up by now. I’m afraid it’s worse than that. He hasn’t moved since that first shot nearly got us.”

“Could he have been hit?”

“That’s how it looks to me. From the way one of his arms is swinging about he’s unconscious.”

“My God! I hope not.”

“Is he as important as all that?”

“Too true he is. I was ordered to take particular care of him. If anything happens to him it’s likely to be too bad for me.”

“Who is he, exactly?”

“I don’t know. All I know is, some big bug from his London Embassy will be at the farm when we get back, to collect him.”

“Well, I don’t like the look of him.”

“Can you reach him?”

“No. I can’t pull my seat back to get to him while I’m in it.”

“Then we can’t do anything about it.”

“I wouldn’t say that. We might land and have a look at him.”

“Are you crazy?”

“There are miles of open ground a bit farther north. If he’s badly hurt we should try to do something for him if it’s at all possible.”

“Do you mean that seriously?”

“If he’s been hit, if he isn’t dead already he’s likely to bleed to death before we get home. It’s up to you. You’re in command.”

Chandler thought for a minute. “Do you know anything about first aid? I don’t.”

“A little. Enough to stop bleeding, if that’s all that is necessary.”

“What will you use?”

“I always carry a medical outfit for emergencies. It’s in the locker.”

“Then perhaps we’d better go down. There’ll be hell to pay if I arrive back with a dead man.”

“It wasn’t your fault.”

“Someone will have to take the rap, and as he was in my care it’s certain to be me. Maybe you’re right. We’ll go down in the next field and have a look at him. There shouldn’t be much risk.”

CHAPTER XI

CHANDLER SHOWS HIS HAND

THE Auster was less than a hundred miles from the north coast of France, over the big, hedgeless farm lands which are a feature of that part of the country, before Chandler, who was still in control of the aircraft, said he could see a field which should suit them. The ground was flat and without a tree in sight. As far as Bertie could judge this was correct and he told Chandler he was content to leave things to him.

The first glimmers of the new day were streaking the sky eastward and the lights of isolated houses were already pin-picking the landscape as the French farmers, habitual early risers, prepared for work. The dim twilight, with a faint suspicion of ground mist common at the time of the year, would make landing conditions trappy rather than difficult, but Bertie did not comment on this. Chandler, obviously an experienced pilot, would be aware of it, and he was prepared to leave everything to his judgement. But even the best pilots can make mistakes.

Chandler, airscrew idling, circled, losing height, always keeping in sight the wide, irregularly-shaped field, apparently grass, which he had chosen. A landing looked easy. There wasn't a tree in sight and no light within half a mile. Bertie had only one apprehension: electric cables, which are almost impossible to see from above, now stretch across every country in Europe, and France in particular is festooned with them.

Chandler made his final turn and at little more than stalling speed made a perfect approach, level and as straight as the flight of an arrow.

It was only at the last instant that a glint of light on an occasional puddle of water told Bertie the truth; that what they had taken to be grass was one of the apparently endless reed beds that fill the hollows in that particular part of the world-as travellers by road or train must have noticed. He yelled, "Look out!" But it was too late.

There was a horrible swishing noise as the undercarriage wheels dragged through the thin, five-feet-high stalks with their feathery tops. The blades of the metal airscrew threshed into them, slicing and hurling them in all directions. The result was inevitable. The aircraft lost speed so quickly that both pilots were pitched forward in their seats. As it sank into the lush growth the nose went down and the tail tipped up; and in that position the machine came to rest.

Bertie lost no time getting out. The crash, if it could be called a crash, was not a bad one, and there was little risk of fire; but he was taking no chances.

Chandler came round from the other side and joined him. "This was your bright idea," he rasped in a passion he made no attempt to conceal.

Bertie adjusted his monocle. "There was nothing wrong with the idea. It

just didn't work out. I'm not blaming you so don't blame me. It was dirty luck. Anywhere else would have been all right. There are grass fields all round."

"It's a hell of a lot of use telling me that now. You had nothing else to do but look at the ground. Couldn't you see what I was landing in?"

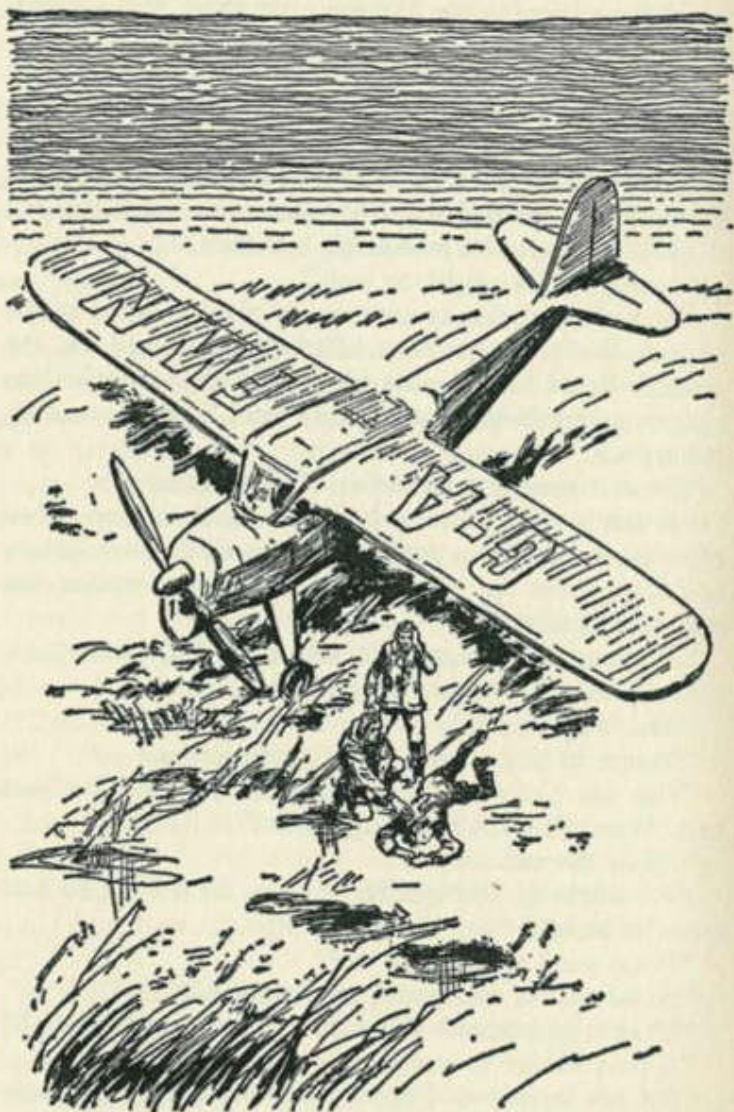
"No, I couldn't. Nor could anyone else in this light. Do you suppose I'd have been such a fool as to let you touch down here had I known what the stuff was? It could have been worse. We are at least on firm ground. We might have been up to our necks in mud."

"That's poor comfort."

"I can't see what you've got to moan about. It happens to be my aeroplane—remember? But instead of standing here arguing about who was to blame don't you think it would be a good thing to get this wretched fellow out of the back seat to see how badly he's hurt?"

"I suppose we might as well."

Not without difficulty on account of the position of the aircraft the passenger was lifted out and laid on the ground. Bertie knelt beside him and it did not take him long to ascertain the truth. "He's dead," he announced, getting up.



It did not take Bertie long to ascertain the truth,

“Dead,” breathed Chandler. “That’s dandy.”

“A lump of something hit him smack in the chest. Must have killed him outright. He wouldn’t have known anything about it. Well, I suppose he

understood the risks he was taking.”

“What are we going to do with him?” Chandler now spoke quietly, as if sobered by shock.

“That’s up to you.”

“You’re in this as well as me, don’t forget.”

“I’m not likely to forget, so let’s not quibble about that. We can’t leave him lying there.”

“What else can we do?”

“We might go through his pockets, for a start, to find out who he is.”

“What good will that do us?”

“As far as I’m concerned, no good at all.”

“Then why bother? What does it matter who he is?”

“It may matter to someone.”

“I’m not interested. I’m only interested in getting away from this mess before anyone comes along; and it can’t be long before someone sees that damn tail sticking up in the air like a church spire. You realize what a spot we shall be in if we’re copped?”

“As well as you do.”

“Good. Well, I’m not staying here any longer.”

“What can we do? Where can we go?”

“You can do what you like, but I’m hoofing it while the going’s good.”

“Hoofing it, where?”

“To the nearest road. There must be one not far away.”

“And then?”

“Cadge a lift to the nearest railway—before it gets any lighter, and before the story of last night’s business is broadcast. I should be able to get to Calais or Dieppe and be on a boat for home before the police start looking for us. If necessary I’ll hire a car to take me to the coast, or the nearest airfield where I can charter a plane. There must be one not too far away.”

“Have you any French money on you?”

“Of course. I always carry some—in case.”

“Have you a passport?”

“No. But I’m not worried about that. I shall manage.”

“How?”

“When I get to the nearest Channel port I shall go to the British vice-consular office, or whatever it is, and report the loss of my passport. It was in my suitcase and somebody pinched the case. They’re bound to give me a pass to England.”

“You talk as if you were going alone.”

“I am.”

“What about me?”

“You can do what the hell you like.”

“You’ll let me have some French money?”

“Not on your life. I may need all I’ve got on me.”

“That’s really noble of you,” sneered Bertie. “You mean you’re going to leave me here to face the music?”

“I’m travelling alone. It’ll be easier. It’d look fishy if two people said they’d lost their passports.”

“Aren’t you afraid that if I’m caught I’ll talk? If I did you wouldn’t get far.”

“No. That’s one thing I’m not afraid of. You’ll be staying here.”

It may have been the way Chandler said this, or perhaps a flash of intuition, that told Bertie what he intended. He had been watching his eyes, and they spoke as clearly as words. Chandler had a gun. There would be two dead men instead of one, and dead men can’t talk. The police when they arrived, as they were certain to sooner or later would assume the corpses had been the only occupants of the plane. There would be no alarm. Chandler would be able to get clean away.

Bertie did not wait for him to reveal his plan. Once the gun was out he wouldn’t have a chance. He sprang. His fist lashed into the pit of Chandler’s stomach. Taken by surprise Chandler doubled up with a gasp. Before he could recover a vicious uppercut—for Bertie was ice-cold with anger—sent him reeling, to tangle his feet in the reeds and go over backwards. This gave Bertie all the time he needed to duck under the aircraft and plunge into the reeds on the far side. He did not stop. Bending low he ran on.

After some seconds, presumably while Chandler was picking himself up and getting round the machine, three shots were fired. But the shooting was blind and did no harm. Bertie, anticipating this, was by this time lying flat, motionless, so that movement in the reeds would not give away his position. There he remained, tense, listening intently for some minutes before getting up and cautiously raising his head to see Chandler, two hundred yards away, leave the reed-bed on the far side and run on towards a line of telegraph poles. In the morning light they were plain to see, and almost certainly marked the position of a road.

As soon as Bertie was satisfied he was not coming back he turned his attention to the Auster. He was confident from the way it had flopped down bodily, any direct shock being absorbed by the reeds, that it couldn’t be seriously damaged. He went first to the airscrew, fearing that if it had actually touched the ground the metal blades would be buckled. They would only have to be slightly out of truth to put the machine out of action. They appeared to be all right. One blade was just touching the ground, but the ground was soft, little harder than mud, which of course accounted for the reeds being there. The undercarriage, of the fixed two-wheel type with half axles and rubber cord shock absorbers, had not suffered. The fuselage showed a few holes from the shelling it had been through but as far as could be judged nothing vital had been touched. After an examination lasting a quarter of an hour Bertie could find no reason why the machine should not fly again if it could be moved to open land.

His big problem was the body of the unlucky passenger, and he spent a few minutes wondering what he should do with it. Had the man only been wounded there would have been no question. But he was dead, so time was no longer of any importance. He didn't like the idea of leaving the body lying there yet there seemed no point in putting it back in the machine even if he could manage that single-handed.

As he stood there considering the matter he was jerked from his quandary by a hail. Looking in the direction whence it came he saw two workmen, in the customary blue blouses, with a horse and plough standing on the upper fringe of the reeds looking at him. He raised a hand to show that he had heard, whereupon one of them advanced towards him leaving the other holding the horse.

Now Bertie had to make up his mind quickly, what he should do, what he should say. His first thought was to drag the body into the rushes where it could not be seen, but finding the idea repugnant he abandoned it. In the end he did nothing, trusting to his wits to provide a plausible explanation.

The man, sturdy, red-faced, with a heavy black moustache typical of the type, arrived smiling sympathetically. Speaking of course in his native language he said: "An accident, *monsieur*?"

"Yes," answered Bertie, somewhat unnecessarily.

The man came round the aircraft, stooping under the tail unit. His expression changed abruptly when he saw the body lying on the ground. "Name of God!" he breathed. "Is he badly hurt?"

"He is dead."

"Psst! What happens?"

"We were forced to land, and—as you see." Bertie indicated the plane.

"What will you do?"

"I was thinking about it when you called—I don't know where I am. Where do you live?"

The man pointed to a house in the distance. "*À là bas.*"

"Have you a telephone?" Bertie thought he might telephone Paris as the quickest way of getting a message through to Scotland Yard.

"*Non, monsieur.*"

"Where is the nearest?"

"At Lanvin."

"How far away is Lanvin?"

"Seven kilometres."

Nearly five miles, thought Bertie quickly. It was a long walk. "And a doctor?" he inquired.

"Also at Lanvin."

Bertie did some more fast thinking. Perhaps it was just as well he was so far off the beaten track. News of what had happened farther south during the night had obviously not yet reached the place. For that matter, the British registration on the fuselage apparently meant nothing to the simple

countryman.

“Have you a motor-car at home?” he asked.

“*Non, monsieur.*” The man smiled faintly as if this was a joke.

“Somehow I must fetch help,” went on Bertie. “If I could get the aeroplane to the field I think it would fly. That would be the quickest way to get to Lanvin. Perhaps there is a railway there?”

“*Non.*”

“Will you help me to move the plane to the field?”

“Certainly, with pleasure, monsieur, if that is what you wish. My son could bring our horse. That will make it easy. What will you do with—” the man pointed to the body.

“It will have to remain here until the police come. No doubt they will bring an ambulance and a doctor.”

The man looked dubious but said he would fetch his son. He went half-way to the field and bellowed instructions. Evidently they were understood, for the son unhitched the rope traces from the plough and leading the horse, the usual heavy grey Percheron, came towards them. When he arrived, after a short discussion on ways and means, the three of them got the Auster to even keel. Bertie made another examination. Finding nothing broken he said they would take the plane to the field.

This, with the help of the horse, proved to be a relatively simple matter. The ropes were made fast to the undercarriage half-struts. Bertie and the older man supported the tail, and with the son leading the animal the Auster was towed to the field which was to have been ploughed. The horse was unhitched. Bertie got into his seat and looked at the petrol gauge. There was a fair quantity left. He started the engine. No trouble. There was no vibration, such as he had feared, to give warning of damage he might have overlooked. Telling the men to hold down the tail he advanced the throttle. The needle of the rev. counter told him the engine was in order. A few runs up and down the field and he was satisfied. He realized of course that he would taking a chance in the air, but he felt the circumstances warranted it.

Now up to this time he had had every intention of flying to Lanvin, landing as close as possible, and with the help of the local police officer make contact with Marcel Brissac in Paris. To him he would be able to tell the truth. It struck him there might be no need for this. He did some quick mental arithmetic and reckoned that if all went well he could be in England well inside two hours. At that hour of the morning it would probably take as long, if not longer, to get in touch with Marcel and bring him to the spot. The local police, who did not know him, might be difficult. He might find himself under suspicion, even under arrest, subjected to interminable questioning. He could not afford to waste time. What he really wanted was to get in touch with Biggles before Chandler got home. If Chandler got home first anything could happen. All signs of what had been going on, and that included Taffy, could disappear. The farm might even be evacuated altogether.

Feeling a bit mean at treating his willing helpers so shabbily he taxied close and through the open side-window shouted: "Guard the dead man until the police come." Then, advancing the throttle, not without a certain amount of trepidation, and ready to cut the ignition at the slightest indication of engine or structural failure, he took off. For a while, still anxious, he flew straight, climbing gently. As the minutes passed, and the aircraft continued to behave normally, he breathed more freely and turned slowly to the north on a course for home.

Looking ahead, after taking a little altitude, he saw a front of towering cumulus clouds, like monstrous cauliflowers, being rolled majestically towards France from the Atlantic by a freshening north-westerly breeze.

He was not sorry to see them, for he was only too well aware that he was not yet out of the wood, so to speak. It was only to be expected from the hostile activity farther south that all French defences, and that included the north, would remain alerted, and cloud cover would be welcome should he be attacked from the ground, or, what he feared more, from the air.

The reception the Auster had received puzzled him as much as it had surprised Chandler. It was most unusual. For an aircraft to be challenged by some airport control tower and ordered away should it threaten collision by wandering on, or near, the course of a liner on one of the regular services, was a fairly common occurrence; but that failure to comply should result in anti-aircraft defences being brought into action, in Bertie's experience had never happened. There must have been a very good reason. Not by the widest stretch of imagination could he have considered the possibility of Biggles having stirred up such a hornets' nest.

He had not yet decided on an actual objective. There had been no time for that. He began to think about it now. Where was he most likely to find Biggles? London? He thought not. Biggles would almost certainly be out looking for him. If so he would probably make his base at Lysett. If he wasn't there Grant would probably know where he was or what he was doing. Bertie decided to make for Lysett.

He had already made up his mind what he would do were he questioned by radio. Indeed, there was only one sensible thing he could do, and that was identify himself, and the aircraft, giving the Interpol signal. What he feared, now it was full daylight, was that he might be shot down by some trigger-happy young French interceptor pilot, sent up to look for the Auster, before he could make himself known.

With the real danger area, the coast and the Channel beyond, in sight, he decided to take the bull by the horns and speak to the ground before he was challenged. In fact, he was mildly surprised that this had not already happened. It did occur to him to wonder if the alert had been called off. If so a general call to that effect might even now be on the air. He should have plugged in earlier, he told himself, as he did so; but other matters had occupied his mind.

The radio seemed strangely silent. He fiddled with it. He tightened the earphones. Not a sound. Not even a crackle of interference. This, too, was unusual. He fully expected to pick up signals being exchanged, or perhaps even music from one of the hundreds of transmitters that now cover the face of Europe like a rash. But there was nothing.

It did not take him long to discover what was wrong. His radio was dead. Stone dead. Whether it had died a natural death through some fault, or, more likely, had been struck by a fragment of metal when the machine was being shelled, he did not trouble to try to find out. It was enough that it was out of action and there was nothing he could do about it. This was real cause for alarm. Even now he might be being challenged. His failure to reply could hardly fail to have unpleasant consequences.

He took a quick, anxious look around. He could see no other aircraft. Almost below him a white fringe of surf on a sandy beach delineated the wavering line of the Normandy coast, with, on the left, the Cherbourg Peninsula jutting out into the dark waters of the Channel. He had climbed to six thousand feet, but the bases of the billowing clouds were still some distance above him. He would have preferred to keep out of them, and not only in order to get his bearings when he reached the English coast; in those great masses of vapour there would be bumps, perhaps severe, and he did not want to put more strain on the Auster than was unavoidable. There might still be a weak spot somewhere.

He compromised by easing the joystick back for more height, resolved to stay just below the clouds if nothing happened, but close enough to reach them quickly and take cover should serious trouble threaten. He was not entirely happy about this because he knew that to anyone looking up from the ground he would be as conspicuous as a beetle crawling across a whitewashed ceiling. It was making the best of an awkward situation. He crossed the coast and headed out to sea.

Nothing had happened, and he had come to the conclusion that he need not have been worried when he was disillusioned in no uncertain manner. Dead on his course, a quarter of a mile ahead, a flash of flame gave birth to a coiling mushroom of black smoke. It was, he suspected, only a warning shot. If he ignored it others would follow, and they would be closer.

For a brief moment he hesitated, tempted to go down, when his behaviour could be explained; but this, inevitably, would take time, while his story was checked and confirmed by London or Paris. It was time too valuable to be lost; time for Chandler to get home and give the alarm. Then anything could happen to Taffy.

Pushing the stick forward for speed he zoomed, at once to be enveloped in cold, grey, clammy mist.

He continued to climb, his intention now being to get above the front. He had no wish to grope his way across the Channel through the murk. But the cloud was thick, and it took a little while. At last the grey turned to a tenuous

white and he burst out into sunshine with the blue sky above. To his disgust, not only blue sky. Not more than a mile away three Alustere fighters, carrying the blue, white and red cockades of the French Air Force, were flying in echelon. From the way they peeled off and came down at him they must have received his position from the ground and were waiting for him to appear.

Bertie did not wait for them. He shot back into the cloud like a dabchick in a dirty millpond when stoned by mischievous children.

¹ French: "Over there."

CHAPTER XII

SHOWDOWN IN THE FARM

AT the same time as Bertie was making his uncomfortable way home, Biggles, shaken by the tragic information he had received from his chief via Grant, the manager of Lysett aerodrome, was contemplating bringing the case to a head by searching the farmhouse. There seemed no longer any reason for delay and he felt suddenly sick of the whole business. He said so.

"Before we jump we'd better all be clear about what we're going to do," advised Gaskin sympathetically.

"I shall arrest Chandler for the theft of an aircraft," answered Biggles.

"When we know more about what happened in France, and that shouldn't take long, the charge may have to be changed to one of murder. Everyone else in the house can be held for questioning. We should be able to judge how far any others are involved when we've heard what Taffy Welsh has to say. He's been locked up long enough. Apart from that I want to get my hands on Chandler."

"You really believe he shot Bertie?"

"What else can we think? The man found dead beside the Auster hadn't been killed in the crash. He'd been shot. Who else could he be but Bertie, and who else could have shot him except Chandler? There's no doubt they left here together. Taffy saw them go to the barn where the Auster was housed. We saw it take off. What more do we want to know?"

"The motive. Can you think of any reason why Chandler should kill Bertie?"

"Yes. The machine was on the ground. It must have looked as if they'd both be caught. Bertie knew too much. If the police picked them up he might have talked. So Chandler would think, and he would have been right. He was determined to save his own skin at any cost. He carries a gun. That's how he was able to force Taffy to land here. That's enough for me. What else has been going on here we can only guess, but we may find the answer inside. Chandler's the man I want."

Gaskin nodded, tapped out his pipe on the heel of his boot and put it in his pocket. "All right, if that's how you want it. I can imagine how you feel. We'd better not go to the door in a bunch. It'd be better to break up and cover both doors in case Chandler makes a bolt for it. If he's the sort of man we think he is that's more than likely; and if he's still got his gun in his pocket we'd better be ready for trouble. If he's used it once he'll have nothing to lose by using it again."

"I hadn't overlooked that."

"Have you got a gun, should Chandler decide to shoot it out?"

"No. Have you?"

"Not me. There are times when I'd be tempted to use it and that could get

me into trouble. By the way, do you know the name of the man who owns this house?"

"No. Let's go and find out. I suggest you come with me to the back door. That's the one facing the field. You've got the search warrant should they demand to see it. The others had better go round to the front. There may be a car in the garage. If so someone may try to get to it. Is that all clear?" Biggles looked round.

"Suits me," agreed Gaskin briefly.

"Right. Then let's carry on." Biggles spoke to those who were to go to the front. "We'll give you two or three minutes to get in position. Get as close as you can but take care not to be seen unless anyone leaves. Off you go."

Ginger, with the constable, and Sergeant Smith of the Special Branch, departed.

Biggles and Gaskin waited a little while. Then Biggles dropped the stub of his cigarette in the grass and put a foot on it. "Let's go."

They walked openly to the field gate and on through the back garden to the door. Gaskin knocked.

The door was opened by the unpleasant-looking female Bertie had seen. Behind her a young Chinese type was looking over his shoulder as he washed dishes at a sink.

"I want to see the master of the house," said Gaskin.

"He isn't here," snapped the woman, and would have shut the door had not Gaskin stopped it with his boot.

"What's his name?" inquired Gaskin imperturbably.

"Who wants to know?"

"I do. I'm a police officer."

"Doctor Hammal. I've told you, he's out."

"Then I'll have a word with Mr. Chandler. I know he's at home."

Again the woman tried to shut the door, but Biggles pushed past her, and brushing aside the Chinese who would have barred his way crossed the kitchen and opened a door on the far side.

Through a haze of cigar smoke he saw an elderly man sitting upright in an arm-chair, a bottle of whisky and two glasses on a small table beside him.

"Are you Doctor Hammal?" he inquired crisply.

"What do you mean coming into my home in this way?" was the sharp answer.

"We're police officers"

"I don't care who you are. You have no right—"

"We have a search warrant. I asked you a question and you'd be well advised to answer it. Is your name Hammal?" Biggles felt Gaskin standing beside him.

"It is. What do you want?"

"Is this your house?"

"It is. What of it?"

"Who else, apart from you and the two people in the kitchen, lives here?"

"No one."

"You are sure there's nobody else in the house?"

"That is what I said. Are you daring to suggest I'm a liar?"

"What about the man you have locked in a room upstairs?"

"I don't know what you're talking about. Are you mad? Why should I lock anyone—"

"You needn't tell me. I know. I've spoken to him. Where's Chandler?"

"I know of nobody of that name."

Biggles shrugged. "Have it your way." He held out a hand. "Give me the key of the room where you have locked Mr. Welsh. I know all about it. Don't waste any more time."

"Oh, very well." Hammal got slowly to his feet and with the aid of a stick walked to a writing-desk. He opened a drawer. Then in a flash he had turned, pointing an automatic. "Don't move, either of you, or I shall be forced to use this," he said, without raising his voice.

"That won't help you," Biggles told him. "You're only making matters worse for yourself."

Hammal did not answer. Still presenting the pistol he crossed the room to a door on the far side and opened it. "Chandler," he called loudly. "Come here. I want you."

Quick footsteps. Chandler appeared. His face was flushed as if he had been drinking, but from his expression he took in the situation at a glance. "What's going on?" he asked, his eyes going from the gun in Hammal's hand to the visitors.

"We're police officers and we're here to ask you some questions," informed Biggles. "You're not compelled to answer them and I must warn you that anything you say may be used in evidence—"

"Cut the cackle. What do you want to know?"

"First, I believe you carry a firearm. Is that correct?"

"What of it?"

"Answer my question. Have you a gun?"

"I have, but—"

"Never mind the reason. I advise you not to attempt to use it. Did you fly an aeroplane to France last night?"

The question seemed to take Chandler by surprise. He forced a laugh. "Now what could have given you that idea?"

"I'm asking the questions. You flew an Auster. Right?"

"So what? I took my machine up for a run round and getting above the clouds may have drifted over France by accident. That can happen to anyone." Chandler tried to speak naturally.

"It wasn't your machine, but we'll let that pass for the moment. You took someone with you. Who was it?"

"You're talking through your hat."

“Am I? Very well, if you won’t tell me I’ll tell you. The aircraft was a police Auster and your passenger was Sergeant Lissie of the Air Police.”

Chandler could not conceal the shock this must have given him. He crossed the room, poured half a glass of whisky and gulped it neat.

Hammal glared at him. “You fool! You liar! You told me Lissie was a friend of yours.”

Chandler stormed back. “I wanted another machine. You agreed to that. And I wanted someone to help me out. How the hell was I to know—”

“That’s enough,” cut in Biggles. “Shall I tell you the rest of the story? You were challenged over France—”

“Rot. Why should I be challenged?”

“Because I saw you take off and warned France to be on the watch for you.”

Chandler stared.

“You landed near Marseilles and were nearly caught on the ground. You got away, but you came under fire and were forced to land in Normandy. There, to cover your getaway you shot your co-pilot and left him—”

Hammal, still glaring at Chandler, burst out: “You didn’t tell me this. You told me—”

“That’s enough,” interrupted Biggles. “I’ll hear what you have to say presently.”

“I can assure you this is all news to me,” swore Hammal.

Turning back to Chandler, determined if possible to get the truth about Bertie, Biggles concluded: “Is there anything you’d care to say before I arrest you for the wilful murder of Air Police Sergeant Lissie?”

Chandler was looking dazed. “You’ve got this all wrong,” he blurted. “I didn’t shoot Lissie.”

“If you didn’t, who did?”

“How the hell should I know?”

“You were there. Do you deny that?”

Chandler drew a long breath. “All right! You seem to know a lot. I’ll tell you the truth.”

This was what Biggles wanted. “I’m listening.”

“Let’s admit that most of what you’ve said is more or less correct. I flew to France last night. Lissie wanted to come with me so I let him. We went in his Auster. He flew it. We landed near Marseilles. On the way home we came under fire and landed in Normandy, but not for the reason you think. The light was tricky and what I took to be a grass field turned out to be a swamp. We piled up in it. After some discussion we agreed it would be safer for each of us to make his own way home.”

“Why?”

“We knew we’d stirred up a hornets’ nest.”

“I suggest the truth is, Lissie told you he was a police officer and therefore had no reason to run away; whereupon you pulled a gun and shot him.”

“Nothing of the sort. Lissie didn’t tell me he was a cop. The first I knew about that was when you told me yourself, just now. I’ll take my oath we parted company by the Auster. He went one way and I went another. I got to a road, got a lift to a garage, hired a car to Barquise aerodrome where I found a machine to fly me back to England. I arrived back here in a taxi. That’s the truth.”

Biggles’ voice was as hard and cold as ice. “Either you learned Lissie was a police officer, or you didn’t want him with you, so you shot him dead and left him lying beside the Auster. There he was found by a farm-hand who reported the matter to the French police who informed Scotland Yard. Isn’t that more like the truth?”

“Nothing like it,” protested Chandler vehemently. “There was a dead man beside the machine but it wasn’t Lissie.”

“Who else could it have been?”

“I’ll tell you. It was—”

“Shut your mouth, you fool,” grated Hammal.

Chandler turned on him in a fury. “Do you suppose I’m going to swing for a murder I didn’t do?”

“I said shut up. You’ve said too much already.”

“Who are you telling to shut up? Oh yes, you’re only concerned with keeping yourself and your damned gang in the clear. I’m not having that. Not on your sweet life.” Chandler faced Biggles. “The man who was killed, not by me but by the French gunners, was—” He broke off. He must have seen Hammal’s gun swing towards him and guessed what was coming. He ducked, jumping sideways like a cat a split second before the gun crashed. Another instant and he was through the door he had left open. His running footsteps receded.

By this time Gaskin had leapt forward, caught Hammal by the arm and wrenched the gun out of his hand. “That’s enough of that,” he growled. “You’re under arrest for attempted murder.” Handcuffs clicked. “Chandler won’t get away.”

Biggles was not so sure. He dashed back through the kitchen to watch the back of the house, confident that those in front would stop Chandler if he tried to escape that way. Actually, his brain was in a whirl, for there was something about the way Chandler had spoken his final words that suggested he was telling the truth for once. That was why Hammal had tried to silence him. Moreover, from what little Hammal had said it seemed there might have been a third person in the Auster, someone whose identity had to be concealed.

A shout cut short Biggles’ train of thought.

“Look out! Chandler! Through a window. Making for the field.” The voice was Ginger’s.

Biggles moved quickly. He looked across the garden towards the field. Through the hedge he could just make out a figure sprinting along the far side. If it was Chandler his intention was obvious. He was hoping to get away in

the Cub.

He set off in pursuit. He was not particularly alarmed. Chandler would look at the petrol gauge and see the Cub had no petrol, or only a drain sufficient for a very short distance. Or would he look at the gauge? A doubt came into Biggles' mind. Perhaps he wouldn't. As the machine hadn't been out since it had been refuelled at Lysett he would assume it was still topped up, and not trouble to check.



Shouting to Chandler to stop, Biggles ran on after him.

Shouting to Chandler to stop, Biggles ran on after him. Chandler had nearly reached the barn, but he heard. He turned, gun in hand. Biggles dived into the ditch, fortunately dry, that ran along the hedge. Chandler fired two shots.

“Watch your petrol,” shouted Biggles, still in the ditch, for he had no intention of taking on a desperate man, armed, without a weapon. His words were lost in the noise of the engine as it was started up. He went on shouting until he realized he was wasting his breath. He took a chance and ran on. Chandler was obviously in his seat and would find it difficult to shoot from there. He reached the front of the barn, taking care to keep the engine between him and the man in the cockpit, just as the Cub came out, engine roaring, and had to jump aside to save being knocked down.

For the last time, as the Cub passed him, with Chandler hatless, looking straight ahead, he yelled: “Stop! Petrol! Look at your—” he threw up his hands helplessly as the Cub went on, gathering speed. Surely, he thought, Chandler wouldn’t be so crazy as to take straight off without giving his engine a minute to warm up. Breathing heavily from exertion he could only stand and watch.

The Cub raced on, tail up, regardless of the cattle which, although still in a corner, might take fright and stampede across its front. But apparently the beasts had learned that aircraft were harmless for they did not move.

Biggles, watching, hands on hips, wondered how far the machine would get before the engine cut out or before Chandler realized from his fuel gauge that he had no petrol. There was nothing he could do. He had no regard for Chandler but as a pilot he didn’t want to see the man kill himself. Not that this was a foregone conclusion. There might be enough petrol to keep the machine in the air for a minute, perhaps five minutes, before the end came, as it was bound to. Even then, Chandler, an experienced pilot, might get down without a serious crack-up. That would depend on altitude and what was below him when the engine cut out.

As the Cub’s wheels left the ground it swept up in a steep climbing turn that made Biggles hold his breath. Such a take-off would be risky at any time. With a cold engine it was madness. It had climbed to about two hundred feet and was still climbing when the end came. The engine coughed. It coughed again and then choked to death. The airscrew spun to a stop. Inevitably, at such a steep angle of climb, in a sudden silence that was uncanny the Cub wallowed helplessly in a stall. It fell off on a wing; the nose whipped down and half going into a spin it plunged earthward like a shot bird.

Biggles could imagine Chandler working feverishly with throttle and joystick knowing they were useless. Given sufficient altitude the Cub would be brought to even keel by its own inherent stability; but there was not enough room for that at the height at which it had stalled. There was nothing Chandler could do. Nothing the best pilot in the world could do. The Cub went into the tree-tops with a rending, splintering crash, which is like no other noise on earth and once heard is never forgotten.

Silence fell. The only movement was the departure of panic-stricken birds from the vicinity.

For a couple of seconds Biggles hesitated, undecided whether to go to the

crash or return to the house. Without petrol there was no risk of fire and Gaskin might have his hands full. Then he acted as would any pilot in the circumstances. He tore across the field as the shortest way to the place where the Cub had ended its career.

When he reached it he found the wreck much as he expected, the fuselage a crumpled heap, its back broken, one wing torn off at the roots and hanging from a tree. Apparently at the last moment the pilot had tried to jump clear. His safety-belt was undone—if in fact in his haste to escape he had troubled to fasten it. The door was open and his body lay half in and, half out of the seat. Feeble moans came from his lips.

Biggles dragged him out of the wreckage. There was nothing more he could do by himself. He would have to go to the house for help. He was wondering if anyone there had seen the crash when after a deep groan death rattled in Chandler's throat. It was, he knew, the end.

Feeling sick and shaken, for no pilot likes to see this sort of thing, Biggles turned away, intending to go to the house, hoping there to find a telephone and so bring a doctor and an ambulance to the spot. He saw Ginger racing down the field towards him.

"There's no hurry," he told him, as he ran up.

"I was watching," panted Ginger. "How bad is it?"

"Couldn't be worse."

"You mean?"

"Yes. He's dead."

"Too bad. But if ever a man asked for it, he did, the way he took off. Knowing the Cub was out of petrol—"

"I'm not holding myself responsible for that," declared Biggles shortly. "Even with a full tank no one but a drunk or a lunatic would have dragged a machine off the ground like he did that Cub."

"So Lorrimore won't get it back after all."

"That doesn't matter. At least he'll now be able to claim the insurance and buy a new one." Biggles took a last look at the crash. "They say every man's life is what he makes of it," he remarked philosophically. "Well, this is what Chandler has made of his. Silly fellow. But there, who are we to judge? Let's get back to the house."

"You're too soft," muttered Ginger. "I haven't forgotten he killed Bertie."

"That remains to be proved," answered Biggles. "Come on."

CHAPTER XIII

HOW IT ALL ENDED

“WHAT was happening at the house when you left?” Biggles asked Ginger as they hurried back.

“Everything’s under control. They’re all there. Gaskin has arrested everyone and phoned the County police for transport to take them into custody.”

“Who do you mean by all?”

“There were only three people in the house; an old man, a Chinaman and a woman.”

“I would have expected more. But with a pilot it may have been enough.”

“That’s all we could find.”

“What about Taffy?”

“I let him out. He’s all right. He’s in the living-room with the others. Sergeant Smith was searching the place when I came away. I heard the Cub start up and dashed out to see what happened.”

“Have any of the prisoners said anything?”

“Not a word in my hearing.”

“I was afraid of that. If that old man, Hammal as he calls himself, won’t open his mouth, it will still be some time before we know what I’m most anxious to know. Chandler knew the answer, and was in the mood to squeal, but Hammal shot at him. Now he can’t tell us.”

“Tell us what?”

“The truth about Bertie.”

“What more do we want to know? Chandler murdered him.”

“I’m not so sure of that. I can’t remember Chandler’s exact words, but from the way he said them it seems there might have been three people in the Auster when it crashed. If so, who was the third man? I’m wondering if it was to meet this unknown character, if there was one, that the C.D. car came here. It must have had some reason for coming to a place like this in the middle of the night.”

“You think it may have been this unknown man who was shot.”

“It seems possible. He didn’t arrive here.”

“In which case there’s a chance Bertie may still be alive?” Ginger looked expectant.

“I’m beginning to hope so.”

“But Bertie didn’t get back here either.”

“I don’t see how he could, with the machine crashed.”

“But Chandler managed to get back.”

“Obviously he had the means to do so. Bertie wouldn’t be likely to have much money on him, English or French, and if Chandler went off on his own,

as he said he did, Bertie would be left in France to get home as best he could. That, of course, is assuming Chandler didn't shoot him."

"Then you think there is hope?"

"Yes. But I'm afraid to bank on it. These people were all lying so one doesn't know what to believe; but as I say, there were moments when Chandler's explanation of what happened in France had a ring of truth in it. Hammal must know the truth about the man who was killed because that's the first thing Chandler would tell him. He'd have to tell him."

"Why?"

"To explain why he came home alone. If there was a passenger in the Auster, and the car was here to meet him, there would be no point in keeping it here if he wasn't coming. Is that why it went off? But we're going round in circles. If Hammal won't open his mouth we shall have to wait for the facts until I've spoken to the Air Commodore. By this time he should have the details from France."

They reached the house and went straight through to the living-room. On the table lay a stack of money, in notes; and beside a bag in which apparently they had been contained, a pile of small objects.

"What's all this?" asked Biggles.

The Security officer answered. "Diamonds."

Biggles whistled softly. "So that was the line of business."

"Commercial diamonds," Sergeant Smith corrected himself.

Biggles look at Gaskin. "What has Doctor Hammal to say about them?"

Hammal himself answered. "I have nothing to say except that they are my property and I can prove that I paid for them."

"Where were they going?"

"That's my business."

"Who was the passenger Chandler went to France to pick up?"

"Ask him. Being what he is no doubt you'll find him ready to talk."

"He won't talk any more to anyone. He's dead. He tried to escape in the stolen plane and was killed taking off."

"Serves him right, the fool. He couldn't leave the bottle alone."

Biggles' lips curled contemptuously. "A nice friendly epitaph for a man who's been working for you."

"I have nothing more to say."

Biggles turned to Sergeant Smith. "Where's the telephone?"

"In the hall."

"Is it working?"

"It was a few minutes ago when I rang up County police headquarters."

"Would you mind ringing them again and ask them to arrange for a doctor and an ambulance to be sent along to pick up a man who has been killed in a plane crash?"

"Certainly."

Biggles turned back to Hammal. "You may change your mind when

you've had time to think it over. We shall find out all we want to know, anyway. I have the number of the C.D. car that was here last night. No doubt the French police have everything sorted out by this time." To Gaskin he went on: "Can I leave you to take care of things here? I'm anxious to get back to Lysett to see if there's any more news from the Yard."

"About Bertie."

"Of course."

"Go ahead. It won't take us long to get everything tidied up."

For the first time Biggles spoke to Taffy. "Are you all right?"

"Nothing wrong with me whatever."

"Good. Would you like to come with me to Lysett? We'll get you home from there. There'll be room for you in our car."

"Thanks. I've been here long enough."

"You can tell us all about it on the way to the aerodrome. Gaskin, I imagine your party will be flying back to London in the Viking?"

"When I've handed this lot over."

"Then I may see you at Lysett; if not, at the Yard."

Biggles, Ginger and Taffy walked down the field to the road, and finding the car where it had been left were soon on their way to the airfield.

"I'm still a bit mixed up about all this, look you," remarked Taffy.

"I'll tell you all about it presently," answered Biggles. As they turned into the gate Ginger clutched Biggles' arm. "Can you see what I see?"

"I don't know what you're looking at."

"That Auster, standing in front of the sheds."

"What about it? There are scores of Austers in the country."

"But there's only one with that registration. Look for yourself."

Biggles looked hard. "I don't believe it. There must be some mistake. Bertie's machine crashed in France."

"Whatever happened to it, it seems to have managed to get home."

Biggles brought the car to a skidding stop in front of the office. Grant was standing at the door.

"How did that machine get here?" shouted Biggles, pointing at the Auster as he sprang out.

"It flew in."

"When?"

"About a quarter of an hour ago."

"Who brought it here?"

"Lissie."

"Where is he?"

"In the washroom, having a clean up."

Bertie himself appeared, smiling. "What cheer, chaps," he greeted, fixing his eyeglass.

Biggles gripped his hand and clapped him on the shoulder. "Am I glad to see you."

“Same here, old boy.”

“I never expected to see you again.”

“And believe you me, laddie, there were moments when *I* never expected to see *you*.”

“But I still don’t get it. France reported the Auster had crashed.”

“So it did, but nothing was badly bent. With the help of a couple of farmers and their nag I managed to get it off.”

“I don’t mind telling you we were worried stiff,” asserted Biggles. “We thought Chandler had shot you. France said a body was lying beside the machine.”

“Quite right, but it wasn’t mine. Feel me. I’m no ghost. Chandler had a crack at me but I got away and he made off. Wait till I see the dirty dog. I’ll tell him—”

“You won’t tell him anything. When we went to the farm to pick him up he skipped in the Cub. He stalled taking off and went into the deck. He’s dead.”

“Oh dear! Too bad.”

“Whose was the body that got us all foxed?”

“Some Johnny we picked up near Marseilles.”

“Don’t you know who he was?”

“Not a clue, old boy.”

“Didn’t you go through his pockets?”

“Not me. Corpses give me the willies. Chandler didn’t kill him. We were plastered pretty badly on the way home, as you’ll see when you have a look at my flying machine. The wretched fellow in the back seat stopped a lump of something and we landed to see if we could do anything about it. Chandler put us down in a lot of rushes mistaking them for grass.”

“The great thing is, you’re home. You can tell us more about it when I’ve had a word with the chief on the phone.”

Grant stepped in. “While you’re doing that I’ll lay on something to eat. No doubt you could all do with a bite.”

“Several bites, if you can run to it,” requested Bertie. “I missed my early morning cuppa.”

Biggles was soon back. “Okay,” he said. “The chief hasn’t any fresh news. France is in a bit of a flap. They found the body, which is still unidentified, but no aircraft. The Air Commodore can now tell them why. Proceed, Bertie, and tell us all about it.”

Over a substantial meal Bertie told his story. “I had about a pint of juice left when I waffled in here,” he concluded. “What beats me is, why the French pranged us as they did. They fairly gave us the works. Anyone would think they were all ready and waiting for us.”

“Matter of fact, they were,” said Biggles sadly. “My fault. Sorry. We saw the Auster take off. I sent Ginger to put a call through to Marcel Brissac and tell him what was on the way.”

“Oh here, I say, that was a bit thick.”

“How were we to know you were in it?”

“Absolutely—absolutely. I see that. Which reminds me. I shall have to go back to that bally farmhouse.”

“Why?”

“I left my police ticket in the room where they locked me up, pushed down the back of the chair. I thought if I was searched, and it was found, Chandler might be peeved with me.”

“I’d say you were right, at that,” grinned Biggles. “But there’s no need for you to go back there. Gaskin or one of the others will still be there. It’ll take some time to search the entire house. Ginger, you might give them a ring and ask them to pick up Bertie’s pass. They can bring it along when they come.”

Ginger made the call. “That seems to be the lot,” he said when he returned.

“Not quite,” disputed Biggles. “We’ve cleaned up this end of the racket, but there’s still the other end. The people there can’t know what has happened here so the chances are they’ll carry on. I’ll let Marcel know. I may slip over and see him. He can lay on a reception party for the gang the next time they turn up to meet the aircraft. That should get everything buttoned up. Tell me, Bertie. Do you know exactly what the racket was?”

“No, but from what I saw I’ve a pretty good idea. It seemed to be a two-way job. Chandler was taking over commercial diamonds. He told me so. He also as good as admitted they were intended for one of the Iron Curtain countries. He was, I think, paid for them in cash at the other end. He then brought back with him someone who didn’t want to be seen entering the country through one of the regular channels, airport or seaport. Probably some cheap crook in a hurry to leave the Continent.”

Biggles shook his head. “I doubt if you’re right, there. I suspect it was someone, possibly a spy, important enough to have a foreign Diplomatic Corps car sent to meet him at the farm. We may know more about that presently. Meanwhile, let’s get back home. The Air Commodore will be biting his nails waiting to hear what we’ve all been up to.”

“What about my poor old Auster?” questioned Bertie. “I wouldn’t swear it’s a hundred per cent safe to fly.”

“It’d better stay here for a complete overhaul. I’ll fix that with Grant. I must also thank him for being so helpful, lending us his car, and so on. I don’t think we need wait here for Gaskin. In the Viking he may be home before us. I’m anxious to get back and report to the chief. He’ll be expecting us.” Biggles got up.

“What about my pass?” queried Bertie.

“Gaskin will bring it along with him when he finds we’ve gone on. Let’s get mobile.”

For all practical reasons, as far as the Air Police were concerned, this was really the end of the case of the Missing Aircraft.

Nothing else of importance was found at the farm.

Hammal persisted in his refusal to speak and some time later was

sentenced to a long term of imprisonment on several counts, one of which was the attempted murder of Chandler, to which Biggles and Gaskin were witnesses. His real nationality was never learned.

It turned out that the woman in the house was his wife, and completely in his power. She was charged as an accessory and got off lightly. The Chinese boy was discharged for lack of evidence against him. A simple creature, his story was he had been Hammal's cook at a period when the doctor—if in fact he was a doctor—had lived in China. His master, he said, liked certain Chinese dishes, so when he had moved to England he had taken him with him. He swore he didn't know what went on at the farm except that men came and went. This might well have been true.

The identity of the man who had been killed in France was never disclosed. It was said that he carried nothing by which he could be identified. Biggles did not question this; he was not sufficiently interested; but he had his own ideas about it. He linked it with the fact that although he was able to give the registration of the C.D. car which had visited the farm, he was never told to whom it belonged although certain people must have known. He suspected it was one of those political matters which for diplomatic reasons are better hushed up.

It only remains to say that he took the first opportunity to go to France and compare notes with his Interpol colleague, Marcel Brissac. With him went Bertie, who was able to point out where the clandestine meetings took place. As a result of this a trap was laid, and the next time a car arrived on the scene at night the French police were there waiting for it.

THE END